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The Gothic Manuscript

a new short Mike Shayne novel by

BRETT HALLIDAY

THE AFFAIR of the GANDER'S SAUCE

a new short novel of suspense by

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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MAY, 1966 Vol. 18, No. 6

TWO COMPLETE SHORT NOVELS

THE GOTHIC MANUSCRIPT

by BRETT HALLIDAY

From Miami to New York stretched a tangled trail of death. It was only a piece of old parchment, but someone had put a steep value on it, Mike Shayne was to discover. The asking price, the redhead learned—was murder.

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THE AFFAIR OF THE GANDER'S SAUCE

by FLETCHER FLORA

He knew his way around the murder racket. Dames were his dish and death his business and three fresh graves testified to his prowess. Nobody in our town had any idea of who the killer might possibly be—except my nosey wife.

. . . . . 80 to 125

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Featuring

MIKE SHAYNE

THE GOTHIC MASTERPIECE

A New Complete Short Novel

by BRETT HALLIDAY

It was only a piece of old parchment, but some one, Mike Shayne was to discover, had put a steep value on it. The asking price, the red-head learned—was Murder!

THE OFFICES of the Inter-Continental Insurance Company are on the fifteenth and sixteenth floors of a building at Park Avenue and 52nd Street in New York. The larger offices with windows overlooking Park Avenue are on the sixteenth floor and are occupied by executives. In one of these offices a well-groomed man replaced his telephone receiver and flicked his intercom switch.

"Miss Halsey, get me Ed Landers. Immediately."

The well-groomed man flicked off his switch and swiveled in his high-backed leather desk chair to look out his windows. He stared at the buildings across the street for some time. He did not turn back until a small, heavy-set man entered the room.

"Trouble, Mr. Fuller?" the heavy-set man said.

Mr. Fuller, vice-president in charge of special policies for Inter-Continental, swiveled to face the heavy-set man.

© 1966, by Brett Halliday

"A quarter of a million dollars trouble, Landers!" Fuller said.

Landers lighted a cigarette and sat down in one of the modern wood-and-leather chairs in Fuller's elegant office. The short man crossed his legs and waited. He seemed neither impressed nor unimpressed.

Fuller glared at Landers. The vice-president did not particularly like the casual manner.

"You seem unconcerned, Landers," Fuller said.

The smaller man shrugged. "You tell me about it, Mr. Fuller, I investigate. I gather you think there is something to investigate."

Fuller glared harder. The vice-president never had liked the attitudes of the company's investigators, and he never would. To him every penny of the company's money was like his blood. He was only too aware that investigators like Ed Landers did not care at all about the company's money, not really.

"Would you say that the theft of the Gothic Manuscript called for investigation?" Fuller said sharply.

Landers sat up. Now the investigator came suddenly erect as if he had been kicked—hard. He seemed to forget his cigarette. It smoked in his fingers unnoticed as he leaned toward Fuller. His eyes narrowed.

"The Gothic? Stolen?" Landers said.

"Yes," Fuller said. "I just got off the phone. Axel, our agent in Miami, told me. There's no claim yet—it only happened last night—but it's plastered all over the Miami papers."

"Stolen!" Landers said again, his hard voice incredulous.

"That's what I said. Morgan apparently killed one of the thieves, but the other escaped with the manuscript," Fuller said.

Ed Landers remembered his lighted cigarette, put it to his lips, inhaled deeply. All his former arrogance seemed to have vanished. Fuller grudgingly told himself that at least Landers was no fool; the investigator recognized the import of the news.

"But stolen?" Landers said again.

Fuller nodded. "That's why I called you at once. We only included theft as an after-thought on Morgan's part. Fire, yes; damage, loss; any of that we could have expected. The premiums are high enough. But we did not expect theft, did we?"

"It's crazy," Landers said. "Impossible. Who the hell would steal the Gothic? Why? It can't be sold. There isn't even an amateur in rare manuscripts who wouldn't recognize it instantly. Damn it, Fuller, there isn't one person in the world who would know what it was without knowing all about it. No one would buy it; no one would dare sell it!"

"But it's gone, or so it seems," Fuller said testily—he did not like people under him to forget to call him *Mister*. "And Axel says the dead man has been identified as nothing more than a professional thief."

"Impossible," Landers said again. "Unless someone in the know hired him."

"Axel said that, apparently, the other thief, the one who got away, was Morgan's secretary—male," Fuller said.

Landers nodded. "That's more like it. But it still doesn't make much sense."

"That's why I don't think we should wait for Morgan to file a claim. Who do you have down there, unless you can go yourself?"

Landers scratched his jaw. "I'm pretty tied up, and I think a local man would be better anyway. I could get him on it right away, save hours. And a local man would know more about the connections down there."

"All right, get your local contact in Miami on it," Fuller said. "Right away."

Landers nodded and left. Five minutes later he was in his own office and on the telephone with a thin file folder in front of him. Landers opened the folder and snapped into the telephone.

"Get me Mike Shayne, honey. In Miami. Person-to-person, and fast."

II

MIKE SHAYNE tugged on his left earlobe and looked out at the bright Miami sun through the window of his Flagler Street office. He had known Ed Landers a long time, and Ed was a good man. But the story Shayne had just heard was hard to swallow. He turned in his chair and buzzed Lucy Hamilton.

"Get me the morning paper, angel," Shayne said. "And call Chief Gentry and find out who's on the Morgan robbery case."

Shayne returned to his reverie. Briefly, the story was this: One of the rarest manuscripts in the world had been stolen. Here in Miami. Called the Gothic Manuscript, it was the only known extensive piece of written manuscript in the Old Gothic language. Ten pages of hand-lettered, illuminated vellum, in the extinct Gothic language, the Cyrillic alphabet. The ten pages were part of a Bible—the first ten pages of Deuteronomy. It had been found in North Africa only two years ago by an expert philologist, Thomas

Morgan, and it had made Morgan famous. Morgan had been taking it all across the country to any university that wanted to see it—for a fee.

Shayne turned his grey eyes to his pert secretary when she came into his private office. Lucy laid the *Miami Daily News* on his desk.

"Chief Gentry says Lieutenant Bruce is handling the case," Lucy said.

Shayne nodded and looked at his brown-eyed secretary.

"Have you ever heard of the Gothic Manuscript, angel?"

"No, Michael," Lucy said.

"What would you say it was worth if I told you it was the one and only manuscript the world has in the Gothic language? That no one has spoken Gothic for maybe a thousand or more years?"

Lucy's brown eyes widened. "Why, it would be priceless, Michael."

Shayne nodded thoughtfully. "By which we mean beyond price in more ways than one, right, angel? If it was to be sold, it would cost a king's ransom. On the other hand, it is so valuable that it is almost worthless."

Lucy blinked. "Worthless?"

"Who could you sell it to? I mean, if you stole it?"

His pert secretary stared at Shayne for a long moment. Then she nodded. "Of course," Lucy agreed. 'Much too well known. Has it been stolen?"

"It seems to have been, angel, complete with a killing. Get me an appointment with Lieutenant Bruce."

While Lucy went to call Bruce, Shayne opened the newspaper to the story. It was a fair-sized story on page three. There were details of the Gothic Manuscript, and background material on its finder and owner, Thomas Morgan.

Morgan, it seemed, was a specialist in the early medieval period, and one of the few philologists familiar with Gothic. According to the story, Morgan had heard vague rumors of the manuscript from British soldiers who had served in North Africa during the war. No one else had believed it, but Morgan had, and he had finally found the precious document.

There had been a lot of talk of forgery, but it was finally declared genuine, and Morgan was famous. Museums, libraries, universities, private collectors, even governments had bid for it, but Morgan kept it. Apparently no government could make a valid claim, although the Egyptians were still trying with a suit in various courts.

The story of the robbery itself took little space. It came down to this: Morgan had been working in his hotel room, the manuscript locked up, when two men had surprised him. He managed to shoot and kill one, but the other knocked him out. When he came to, the safe was open, the Gothic Manu-

script and Morgan's secretary were gone.

Lucy buzzed. "Lieutenant Bruce says go over now."

Lieutenant Jim Bruce could add very little to what Shayne had read in the paper. Bruce opened his file on his desk and shrugged.

"Seems open and shut. The secretary, Maxwell Prieto, is gone with the manuscript. The safe was opened with the combination. Prieto had it. We've got an APB out, and his picture."

Shayne looked at the picture. It showed a small bearded man wearing horn-rimmed glasses. A scar was prominent on his cheek.

"Morgan says he wore the beard partly to cover the scar," Bruce said. "He'll probably have shaved the beard, but the scar should trap him."

"Maybe," Shayne said. "What about his background?"

"Morgan hired him six months ago," Bruce said. "Morgan agrees he was a fool: Prieto probably had it all planned. But Prieto had good credits and letters from European experts. We're checking them out now."

"Almost certain to be phony," Shayne said. "He stole pretty openly. That means he must have had a good plan all the way. By now he'll look a lot different. Even the scar was phony; I'll bet on it."

Bruce nodded. "Morgan thinks that too, now."

"What about the dead man? Did Morgan usually carry a gun?"

"He has a license. He always kept the gun handy when he had the manuscript around," Bruce said. "The dead man was Tony Dimanche, a small-time hood they know all about in New York. The punk specialized in art and jewel heists usually."

"I wonder why Morgan kept the gun around? I mean, who would steal something that unique, Bruce?" Shayne said.

"I know what you mean, but someone *did* steal it. Morgan was right," Bruce said. "We kicked that around, too. Gentry couldn't figure it. But guys like Tony Dimanche don't work for fun. *Someone* wanted that manuscript."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "Not Tony Dimanche, and probably not the secretary Prieto. There's got to be a buyer somewhere."

"That's what we think, but Prieto is our best lead right now."

Shayne stood up. "Maybe. You mind if I talk with Morgan about it? I'm working for the insurance company."

"Go ahead, Mike. Maybe you can get a lead to Prieto."

As he left Bruce's office, Shayne did not think that a lead to the missing secretary was going to be easy. Prieto had lifted the manuscript pretty openly; it figured it would not be easy to find him. But Shayne was more interested now in a scholar who carried a gun.

III

THOMAS MORGAN was a tall, muscular man who looked more like a Western hero than a scholar of ancient, dead languages. The philologist waved Shayne inside the hotel suite when the detective explained his errand. Morgan was not alone.

"Come in, Shayne," Morgan said. "That manuscript is my life. If you can get it back, I'll double any fee the insurance company pays you. I don't want a lousy $250,000. I want my manuscript!"

Morgan's companions were two women and a young man. One of the women was a tall, slender blonde wearing thick glasses that did not hide her good looks. The other was older, dark-haired, and even better looking than the blonde. The young man was big, and he had a strong resemblance to Thomas Morgan.

"My son George," Thomas Morgan said. "And my wife, Sheila, and my secretary Deirdre Brian."

Morgan's wife was the older woman, the dark-haired one. She may have been older, but not old enough to be the mother of George Morgan. Shayne decided that the idea that scholars were cold-blooded was definitely wrong. The tall blonde was Deirdre Brian, the secretary.

"I thought Prieto was your secretary," Shayne said. "Did you replace him with Miss Brian?"

"No, Maxwell was my real private secretary, a scholar in his own right. Deirdre is my regular secretary. She worked for Maxwell, also. You see, since I discovered the Gothic Manuscript, I've been deluged with letters, offers, scholarly inquiries, all that," Morgan explained. And the big scholar's eyes lighted up. "It was the discovery of the century, of the last two centuries! It was my discovery. They all wanted it, and they wouldn't name it the Morgan Gothic out of spite. But it was mine!"

"It certainly looks like someone wanted it," Shayne said drily. "Which is what puzzles the insurance people. Who could have wanted it? No one could admit having it."

Young George Morgan laughed. "Try the damned Egyptians!"

"Or six other governments," Sheila Morgan said. "Once in their hands, who could get it back? We'd be in court forever."

Shayne looked at Morgan. "Is that true?"

"Substantially," Morgan said. "You see, I bought it from an Egyptian trader in Timbuctu. The trader said he got it from a German officer in Libya. Markings on it show that it had been in Italy at some time in the last thousand years, and in Spain more recently. There is little doubt that the German found it in Spain."

Shayne tugged on his ear. "So you're saying that Egypt, Libya, France, Germany, Italy and Spain all think they have a claim on the manuscript? And you think they hired Dimanche and your secretary to steal it for them?"

Morgan shrugged eloquently. "All I can say is that they have all, at one time or another, claimed the Gothic, and they knew I wouldn't sell or give it up. Once in their hands, it would be hard to get back. That's why you've got to stop Prieto!" Morgan's voice rose almost to a scream. "The swine! I trusted him! The filthy pig! That manuscript is mine!"

After Morgan's outburst there was a silence in the sunny hotel room. Shayne was still tugging thoughtfully on his ear. Morgan, for all his reputation, seemed very unlike a scholar. There seemed to be a lot more emphasis on possession of the Gothic than on the manuscript itself.

But it was something else that really bothered Shayne.

"Why both of them?" Shayne said slowly. "I mean, why send a known professional thief and a carefully planted secretary?"

George Morgan snorted. "That's simple. I'll bet Prieto planned it to look like a simple robbery with himself in the clear, but Dad surprised them."

"Did you surprise them?" Shayne asked Morgan.

"In a way," the big, muscular scholar said. "I wasn't supposed to be here, and, as you can see, my desk is somewhat hidden over there in the corner. I think my son is right: Prieto planned to fake an armed robbery by Dimanche, have himself knocked out. That way he could watch all my efforts to get the Gothic back, the swine!"

"How could he fool you into hiring him so easily?"

"It wasn't so easily, Shayne," Morgan said. "His credentials were in perfect order; he knew the field very well. What reason did I have for suspecting him? I investigated a few references from Germany and Spain, and everything checked out. I had no reason to suspect either his motives or his appearance."

Shayne nodded. "He either planned it a long time and built up the credentials, or he took the place of the real Prieto, who's probably dead somewhere. We'll find out soon, or the police will."

"You think they can trace him, Mr. Shayne?" Sheila Morgan asked.

"I think they'll come up against

a blank wall," Shayne said drily, "but walls can be pierced." The detective looked again at Thomas Morgan. "Do you have any other suspects besides the six foreign governments?"

Morgan shook his head slowly. "Hundreds of people wanted the Gothic. I've had many offers. But I can't see how anyone but a government would dare to steal it."

The blonde secretary, Deirdre Brian, spoke for the first time.

"There are collectors who would just want it and never show it, Dr. Morgan," she said.

Thomas Morgan looked at her. "Yes, there are. Normally, I'd agree, but in this case . . . ? No, you see, Shayne, the value of the Gothic is in its study, its use. I really can't see anyone taking such a risk and then hiding it."

Shayne changed tack. "You made money by letting scholars see the manuscript. Is that right, Dr. Morgan?"

"Yes, why not?" Morgan said. "I gave up my teaching and writing; I have to live."

"What will you do if you don't get it back?"

Morgan went white, as if the thought had never actually occurred to him. He seemed to look around the hotel room for help. He got none. George Morgan was staring out the window as if he did not want to look at his father. The wife, Sheila, was carefully studying her hands, but Shayne saw a faint smile on her full lips. He had a shrewd idea that young Mrs. Morgan had $250,000 in insurance money on her mind. Morgan finally shook his head.

"Go back to teaching, I suppose," the big scholar said. "I'm a good teacher. I have copies of the script, of course, and I know more about it than anyone on earth."

Shayne again changed tack. "Mrs. Morgan is your second wife, I suppose?"

Morgan smiled. "Does that have some bearing on the theft of the Gothic?"

"You never can tell," Shayne said bluntly. "She's here, and so is your son."

"My son is a scholar of languages in his own right," Morgan said testily, "and my wife is—well, my wife. What else should she be? If you insist—yes, Sheila is my second wife. My first wife divorced me some years ago. Sheila—"

Shayne considered the information that young George Morgan was also an expert in the field of the Gothic Manuscript. He interrupted Morgan.

"Does your wife happen to be expert in your field, too?" Shayne asked.

"Yes, she was a graduate student of mine," Morgan said. "And I think that is about all we can tell you. We're wasting time. What you should be doing is finding Maxwell Prieto!"

"Do you have any ideas?" Shayne said drily.

"If I did, I would be tearing him limb from dirty limb! No, I have no idea. But he has to sell the Gothic to someone, as you said."

"Unless he was an agent for some foreign government, and is out of the country already," Shayne said.

Morgan was pale. "Find him, Shayne, and you can name your price!"

Shayne raised a bushy red eyebrow. "Well, well. Do you make that much from showing it?" the redhead asked.

"Yes," Morgan said. "I do. And now you had better leave. I have work."

Shayne looked at them all, and then turned and walked out into the hallway of the hotel. Once the door closed behind him, Shayne stopped and began to rub the stubble on his gaunt chin. There was something about Dr. Thomas Morgan he did not like. Money was too important, and so was fame. And there was something very fishy about the theft. It did not sound like a simple robbery. It had the ring of espionage. Of course, Morgan could be right about it being the work of a government.

Shayne sighed. It was not going to be easy to find Maxwell Prieto. If it was the work of a government, Prieto was probably long gone by now. Still considering this, Shayne began to walk down the hallway.

A door in front of him opened. He tensed, reached for his pistol.

Deirdre Brian stepped out into the hall and put her finger to her pretty lips.

IV

THE BLONDE secretary motioned for Shayne to follow her. She led the way around the corner in the corridor to the fire exit. Inside the door, out of sight on the stair landing, she faced Shayne.

"Mr. Shayne, I just wanted to tell you something," the Brian girl said.

"Go ahead," Shayne said.

"Well, it's about Maxwell, Mr. Prieto," Deirdre Brian said. "I—well, there was something very strange about him."

"I imagine there was," Shayne said bluntly. "He was planning the theft all along."

"No that's not what I mean," Deirdre Brian said.

"Tell it your way," Shayne urged quietly.

"Well, it was just peculiar," the girl said. "I mean, he was secretive, quiet, you know, and he worked very closely with Dr. Morgan."

"Wasn't that his job?" Shayne asked.

"Yes, but—I got the strangest feeling that he really didn't *know* very much about the Gothic Manuscript, or any other aspect of philology. He—he didn't sound right. His credentials were all foreign, but he didn't really have an accent."

Shayne rubbed his gaunt chin. "Do you have anything specific?"

"Well," the girl said, hesitated. "Once I asked him about Madrid, and I'll swear he knew nothing about Madrid. Yet his credentials said he'd worked there for years."

Shayne nodded. "We've pretty well decided those papers were phony."

"I know. But don't you think some government would have sent a man who at least *fitted?* I mean, if his credentials said he had worked in Madrid, wouldn't they at least send a man who knew Madrid a little?"

Shayne was thoughtful. "I see what you mean. Then you don't think he was working for some government?"

"I don't know. But he just didn't seem right as Dr. Morgan's secretary," the girl said. "He was almost, well—uneducated."

"And yet Morgan apparently suspected nothing," Shayne said. "Is that what you mean? If you noticed something odd, why didn't Dr. Morgan?"

The girl nodded slowly, her blonde hair catching the dim light of the stairwell.

"Yes, I suppose that's partly what I mean. Prieto just didn't seem like a scholar, or a scholar's assistant, and yet Dr. Morgan never seemed to notice."

Shayne tugged harder on his earlobe. "All right, it does sound odd. You go back and sit tight, but watch them. Will you do that?"

"Yes, Mr. Shayne, I will," Deirdre Brain said, and she looked straight into Shayne's grey eyes. "You see, I know how important that Gothic manuscript is. It should have been in a museum, or given to a university. Dr. Morgan turned it into a sideshow."

"I've thought about that myself," Shayne agreed. "Just keep your eyes open. Okay?"

The blonde girl smiled, nodded, and slipped back out into the corridor.

Shayne did not go out again, but walked down the stairs. He was thinking even harder about Dr. Thomas Morgan, who seemed more like P.T. Barnum than a scholar. Shayne wanted to know a little more about the good doctor. He decided to pay a call on Professor James at Miami University.

Professor James chewed on the ear-piece of his glasses as he lis-

tened to Shayne. The professor had heard about the theft; it was his field. When Shayne had finished, James leaned forward.

"What do you want to know, Mike?" James said.

"What kind of scholar is Morgan?"

James chewed on his glasses. "Good—at least he was. Very good. He was the only man good enough to recognize in the rumors about that manuscript the evidence of truth. I would say he was the first man in his field."

"Was?" Shayne said.

"He changed, after he found the Gothic. I don't know how to put it, but he became obsessed with it. Wanted it named the Morgan Gothic, and refused to give it to any institution. Any other scholar would have given it, and been proud to. But Morgan made money out of it. More than that, he seemed to think that it belonged all to him, it and all the money it could bring."

"All right," Shayne said. "What about the theft? Morgan seems to think it could have been planned by some government."

Professor James shrugged. "Possible. There were many claims of national ownership. But I really doubt if any except, perhaps, the Spanish or Egyptians would resort to stealing."

"Why them?" Shayne snapped testily.

"Their claims were good, very strong. As a matter of fact, the Egyptian case against Morgan was making headway. I think they stood a chance of having it declared their true property."

"Then why steal it?"

"Because getting back a national treasure is harder than establishing the right to it. A court might grant the Egyptians right to have it, but have no power to get it back for them. On the other hand, if a foreign government had it, Morgan would find it hard, or impossible, to have it returned to him."

"I see," Shayne said.

"But I really can't see even the Egyptians stealing it, certainly not until it had been declared their national property."

"It hadn't been?"

"No, not yet," James said.

Shayne narrowed his grey eyes. "But there was a strong possibility that it would be?"

"Yes, there still is," James said.

Shayne considered this information. An uneasy thought was going through his mind. A suspicion. Morgan considered the Gothic his private preserve, but it was possible it would be officially declared Egyptian property. What would Morgan do?

"What do you think Morgan would have done if it looked like it might be taken from him?" Shayne said slowly.

The professor chewed on his glasses and stared down at his

desk. Then he looked up at Shayne.

"I think he would rather have destroyed it, or—"

"Or stolen it himself," Shayne finished. "Arranged a theft so that he could keep it."

"I think he might have," James said. "Who would buy it?"

"But he would lose a lot of income," Shayne said. "He could never show the manuscript."

"I suppose the insurance money could have helped," James said.

"What about a private collector?" Shayne said. "Someone who would buy the Gothic and not care about showing it. For such a man, it should be worth a hell of a lot of money."

James nodded wearily. "There are men like that in our field. Not many, but some."

Shayne stood up. "Thank you, Professor. That might help. Just in case, keep your ears open. Okay?"

"Sure, Mike. I'd like to see that manuscript found, too."

In his car, driving back to his office, Shayne went over the case. There were three possibilities, really. Some government could have had the Gothic stolen, knowing how hard it would be to get it from Morgan. A private collector could have hired Dimanche and Prieto, just to possess it. That fitted much better with the character of Dimanche. Or Morgan could have faked the whole thing.

In which case, if Morgan had faked it, then the big scholar was also a murderer!

When Shayne reached his office, he immediately called Lieutenant Bruce. The lieutenant had little new to offer, except that, as expected, Prieto had turned out to be a phony.

"Those credentials were faked, every one. We've hit a stone wall on tracing him. Nothing at all to go on," Bruce said. "He planned it damned well, Shayne."

Shayne stared at the telephone for a long time after he had hung up. Then he picked it up again and went to work. He called every informer he knew and asked for any information they could dig up on the elusive Maxwell Prieto. After that there was nothing he could do but wait.

By night he had learned nothing. He went home. No one contacted him by midnight, and he went to bed. If there was no news of Prieto by morning, he had one other lead to follow—the dead thief, Tony Dimanche.

V

NIGHT SETTLED over the city of Miami. In the homes of the city all was quiet. Downtown, and across the shining silver of Biscayne Bay at Miami Beach, the lights were still bright, happy people celebrating being alive. But where the people lived only the gentle wind moved.

The elegant residential hotel where Thomas Morgan lived was on the edge of the quiet part of the city, and stood, now, dark and silent. In his suite, Thomas Morgan sat in an armchair, his big frame sprawled easily. He was drinking a whisky and soda, smoking, and smiling to himself in the darkened room.

After a time Morgan stood up and walked across the room to his desk in the far corner. He touched something, and as he opened the top drawer, he froze. Then he turned sharply.

There had been a faint noise in the room.

Morgan stepped toward the sound and reached into his pocket. His eyes stared straight at the door into the kitchen of the suite. The noise had come from the kitchen; he was sure of that. His hand going into his pocket, Morgan moved toward the kitchen.

The kitchen door burst open.

There were two shots—a third shot.

Thomas Morgan crashed backwards into a table, knocked over the table, fell sprawled onto his back. His eyes stared up at the ceiling of the dark suite. But they saw nothing. Morgan was dead.

The killer crossed quickly from the kitchen doorway to the desk, opened the drawer Morgan had been about to reach into before the dead man had heard the noise, and removed a large, flat package. Then the killer whirled and retraced his steps.

At that instant the outside door of the suite opened. The lights blazed on. The killer pointed his gun at the woman in the doorway.

Sheila Morgan stared at the killer and screamed.

The gunman dashed back into the kitchen.

Sheila Morgan continued to scream.

Behind her, from the corridor, Deirdre Brian ran into the room just as the killer vanished into the kitchen. Seconds later the two horrified women heard the rear door of the kitchen slam and distant footsteps going away at a run down the backstairs.

Sheila Morgan seemed unable to move. She stared down at the lifeless body of her husband.

Deirdre Brian spoke.

"The police! They can stop him before he gets out of the building!"

"Of course," Sheila Morgan. "Call them, Deirdre, at once!"

As the blonde girl ran to the telephone, George Morgan came into the room. The younger man was breathing hard as if he had been running. He looked down at his father. He sat in a chair and covered his face with his hands. Deirdre Brian was talking to the police. Sheila Morgan stood beside her stepson, comforting him.

The ringing bell seemed far away to Shayne. He was at the bottom of a deep well, and the bell

was far off above him. It rang and rang, hammering into his brain.

Shayne opened his eyes. The telephone jangled insistently on the table beside his bed. He looked at his watch. It read three o'clock. It was dark outside his window. Shayne reached groggily for the telephone.

"Shayne? Lieutenant Bruce," the voice at the other end of the line said. "You want to come down here? Morgan's been shot."

Shayne sat up straight in his bed, his hand raching for a cigarette, lighting it with a flick of the match against its cover.

"Which Morgan, Lieutenant?"

"Thomas," the voice of Bruce said. "He's dead. I figured you'd like to be in on it."

"Thanks," Shayne said, his free hand reaching now for his shirt. "Where are you?"

"At Morgan's hotel. It happened there."

"Do you know who—" Shayne began.

Bruce cut him off. "It looks like Prieto. He was seen."

"I'm on my way," Shayne said.

The detective hung up and jumped out of bed, his shirt half on. He dashed cold water into his sleepy eyes, finished dressing. Three minutes later he gunned his car out of the garage beneath his apartment-hotel, and drove fast to Morgan's hotel. Police cars were parked out front.

He flashed his credentials, rode up in the elevator alone. The policeman on duty at the door of the suite nodded to him as he strode into the suite. Shayne's grey eyes took in the scene at a glance.

The body lay covered near an overturned table in the center of the room. George Morgan sat in a chair, distraught, his face stained with tears. Sheila Morgan sat on a straight chair, smoking. Deirdre Brian came from the kitchen carrying coffee to anyone who wanted it. A man Shayne had not seen before stood alone near the wall.

"Over here, Mike," Lieutenant Bruce called.

Bruce was in the doorway into the kitchen. The lieutenant's men were hard at work on fingerprints, clues of any kind. The medical examiner was packing up his black bag, and his assistants were waiting with the morgue basket. Shayne strode over to Bruce.

"The killer apparently came in through the rear door to the kitchen, went out the same way," Bruce explained. "Which means he knew the suite pretty well. We got here about six minutes after the shooting, but we found no trace of the killer in the building."

"You said it was Prieto?" Shayne asked.

Bruce nodded. "Looks like it. Mrs. Morgan came in right after the shots. She turned on the light and saw him."

Shayne turned to face Sheila Morgan. The woman crossed her

slender legs, drew deeply on the cigarette.

"I was in the corridor, coming home. Deirdre was with me. George had parked the car. Deirdre was a step or two behind me. I heard the shots and ran to open the door. I switched on the lights and saw him. He pointed the gun at me and ran into the kitchen. It all happened so fast. I was looking at poor Tom."

"But you saw him clearly?" Shayne said.

"Yes. It was Maxwell—I'm sure of it. It all happened so fast, and I was looking at Thomas, but I saw him clearly."

Shayne watched her. "That was risky, wasn't it? I mean turning on the lights. He might have shot you."

"Perhaps," Sheila Morgan said. "I was thinking of Tom. I suppose I wasn't thinking of myself."

"Did anyone else see Prieto?" Shayne asked.

Dierdre Brian paused with a cup of coffee in her hand. The tall blonde seemed shocked, stunned.

"I saw him run out," Deirdre said. "I think it was him, but I didn't see his face."

Shayne turned to George Morgan. The younger man only sighed wearily.

"I came up a few minutes after them. I didn't see anything but Dad lying there—shot," George Morgan said.

Shayne was about to ask who the stranger against the wall was, when the medical examiner spoke.

"Two shots dead center," the ME said. "Death was immediate. He never knew what hit him. Time agrees with the witnesses' statements. You need the body any more?"

Shayne looked toward Lieutenant Bruce. The lieutenant shook his head.

"We went over it, Mike. Nothing on him, and nothing missing from the apartment as far as anyone seems to know," Bruce said.

"Good night then, gentlemen," the medical examiner said.

The morgue attendants picked up the body and placed it into the basket. They picked up the basket and went out the door with it. Everyone in the silent room was left with only a wide stain of blood on the hotel carpet to stare at.

Bruce went to check on the progress of his men. Shayne turned his attention to the stranger, who had moved now to stand near Sheila Morgan. Shayne studied the man. He was tall, but slender. Handsome, probably a well-preserved forty. There was a hard glint to the man's blue eyes, and his hands had not done much work in recent years.

Sheila Morgan noticed Shayne's scrutiny of the man. She reached up and held the stranger's hand. She looked at Shayne.

"This is Frank Short, Mr Shayne," the widow said. "Dr.

Frank Short. Frank is—was a colleague of Tom's, and our close friend."

George Morgan laughed. "Friend!"

"That's enough, George," Sheila Morgan said, glaring in anger at her stepson. "George thinks he detects romance, Mr. Shayne. Perhaps he does—now. But Frank was Tom's friend, and mine, for many years."

The man's cold blue eyes focused on Shayne. There was a sharp intelligence in the eyes. Shayne thought that Frank Short fitted the role of scholar better than the late Thomas Morgan. Yet Short, too, was not exactly an academic type. Shayne began to toy with the idea that, with Morgan dead, if the Gothic Manuscript happened to be found it might become the *Frank Short* Gothic. He wondered if that were worth murder.

"How do you happen to be here now, Dr. Short?" Shayne asked.

"I came as soon as I heard about the theft of the Gothic," Short explained simply. "My flight was delayed, as you can check. I only arrived in Miami a few hours ago. I stopped to eat, and then came here and I walked in on all this." The tall man touched Sheila Morgan.

"Now I'm more than glad I came. Sheila may need me."

Shayne rubbed his chin. "Your field, Dr. Short—it wouldn't be medieval languages also, would it?"

"Yes, it would," Short said evenly. "Tom and I worked a lot together before he discovered the Gothic."

Shayne let his grey eyes move across all their faces. The way it looked, the women might be in the clear, but the two men had no alibis for the time of Morgan's death. And the women, Sheila and Deirdre Brian, were only in the clear by virtue of Sheila Morgan's testimony. It was possible the women were in collusion, or all four were in collusion.

"Can anyone suggest *why* Prieto came back and killed Morgan?" Shayne asked.

There was no answer. They just looked at each other. At last Sheila Morgan spoke.

"I can't really imagine," the widow said. "Unless—"

"Unless Morgan still had the Gothic," Shayne said, "which is possible. Or unless Morgan knew something about Prieto he had neglected to tell us. Or unless—"

"Or unless they were working together," Lieutenant Bruce said bluntly. "My boys can't find a thing, Mike."

Sheila Morgan stared at Bruce. George Morgan raised his head, anger in his eyes. Deirdre Brian seemed stunned at the suggestion.

"Why would my husband conspire to have his own manuscript stolen?" Sheila Morgan demanded.

"For the insurance," Bruce said.

Frank Short laughed. "Don't be stupid! The Gothic is worth ten times the insurance money. All Tom had to do was sell it if he wanted money."

"Perhaps he wanted the insurance money *and* the manuscript," Shayne said quietly. "I understand the Egyptian government was getting close to winning their suit for it. By stealing it himself, he'd get the insurance, and also prevent the Egyptians from taking it."

"Don't be absurd!" Sheila Morgan cried. "I *saw* Prieto shoot him!"

Lieutenant Bruce said suddenly, "I don't think Morgan could sell the manuscript. I've done a little checking, and I've found that no one has offered to buy the Gothic for over a year, not since the Egyptians started their legal action."

Shayne swore softly to himself. Bruce had just built a perfect case against Thomas Morgan. Jealous of his Gothic, wanting money, Morgan saw its value diminishing, and saw the Egyptians getting close to having legal title to it. Why not steal it, collect the insurance—later sell it to some collector? It would be just like Morgan—if he could not exhibit it, then no one would! But Morgan was dead.

"At least we know Prieto is still in Miami," Shayne said.

"A lot of good that is; we can't find him," Bruce said. "How the devil did he know Morgan would be alone? And how could he risk coming back?"

Shayne had no answer. He left Bruce to complete his work, went down in the elevator to his car. He felt beaten. It was now a murder case—and his prime suspect had been murdered!

As he drove slowly home, he wondered what to do next. The police would find Prieto if he could be found. Maybe it was time to follow the other lead, Tony Dimanche. That meant a trip to New York.

VI

THE JET flew high above Virginia in the morning sun as Mike Shayne thought about Tony Dimanche. The professional thief had worried him all along.

What was Dimanche's role in all this? If Morgan and Prieto had been in collusion, why would they need Tony Dimanche? Why kill him?

If a foreign government was involved, why would they hire a small-time crook like Tony Dimanche?

If it happened to be a private collector trying to steal the Gothic, where did Prieto fit?

Could there have been two attempted robberies?

Shayne sat up straight. The jet was passing over Maryland, but the detective did not notice. Two different thefts—Prieto and Tony

Dimanche. It was possible. And that would explain the killing of Dimanche.

No. Shayne sat back. That was too much coincidence. It had to be Prieto and Tony Dimanche working together, probably in an attempt to divert suspicion from Prieto. Only Morgan had killed Dimanche, and so Prieto had been forced to steal openly. That was the police theory, and it fitted.

Shayne looked out the window at New Jersey far below. There was no other explanation, yet something picked at his mind. Thomas Morgan looked so implicated! If Morgan were implicated in stealing his own manuscript, then Tony Dimanche did not fit. If Morgan was in, then Tony Dimanche had to be out.

But Dimanche had been killed —he was in.

Shayne gave it up. He did not know enough. Somehow, all three men did not fit in the case. The police could fit Prieto and Dimanche, but not Morgan. He himself could fit Morgan and Prieto, but not Dimanche. He had to know more about Dimanche.

But first he would report to Ed Landers. He fastened his seat belt and sat back for the landing in New York. . . .

Ed Landers waved Shayne to a seat in the insurance investigator's cubbyhole of an office. Landers looked around sourly.

"We don't rate much around here," Landers said. "You should see the offices of the brass. Oh well, I guess they figure we shouldn't be in the office much."

"Should you?" Shayne said.

Landers grinned. "Probably not. How are you, Mike?"

"Not bad, Ed. How about you? The corporate life seems to keep you well fed."

Landers looked down at his solid stomach. The short man shrugged.

"I eat. Sometimes I wonder if it was worth it. The old private days were good. Oh well, what have you got on this Gothic business?"

"Not much, except your client was murdered last night."

"I heard. It doesn't help; the wife will claim."

Shayne smiled. "You've got the good of the company at heart."

"I guess you get brainwashed. Go on and tell me all."

Shayne told Landers all that he knew, and most of what he was guessing. Landers listened intently. When Shayne got to the part about Tony Dimanche and how he fitted, Landers nodded slowly. The insurance detective patted his belly.

"I agree about Dimanche. There's something funny there. But I think you missed a point, Mike," Landers said.

"What's that, Ed?"

"Look at it from the view that Dimanche is in it. I'd say that yells

that the real thief is some private party. Dimanche is a known jewel and art thief. A party wanting to steal a rare manuscript would look for such a professional. I don't think a foreign government, or Morgan himself, would."

"Then what about Prieto?" Shayne said.

"He's a thief himself, Mike, not the buyer. I'd say that the *buyer* is the key. And he has to have three requirements: he has to be a collector; he has to have no scruples; and he has to be fairly rich. Tony Dimanche would know how much such a script was worth.

"The buyer can't be too rich, or maybe he could have bought it openly. I figure like the police. I figure this buyer hired Tony Dimanche to steal it, but Prieto got wind and cut himself in. Now Prieto has to sell it to the buyer."

"Then why was Morgan killed?" Shayne said.

Landers furrowed his brow. "That has me puzzled. My guess would be it was something to do with knowing too much about Prieto. I don't know, Mike. The theft and the killing don't fit."

"A lot doesn't fit," Shayne said.

"Well, I'll stake my job on the fact that if we find the buyer, we solve the case," Landers said. "And the way to the buyer is through Tony Dimanche."

"I hope so," Shayne said. "Have you got anything on little dead Tony?"

Landers nodded. "I had a big check run on him yesterday. I've got a list of his last addresses, handouts, some names—all I could get. You want to split it up?

"Do you have time?"

"Not really," Landers admitted. "I'm on some bigger stuff. Tell you what—you take the material and see what you can do today. If you find it getting rough, call me in tomorrow."

"Check," Shayne said.

The red-head left his old friend hard at work over a hot dictaphone, and walked out of the plush offices of The Inter-Continental Insurance Company. In the street he took a taxi to the Imperial Hotel. There, in his room, he showered and studied the list Landers had given him. It was long, and the addresses sounded particularly unsavory.

The last known address of the late Tony Dimanche made Mike Shayne think that wherever little Tony was, it has to be an improvement.

The seedy rooming house on the upper West Side gave off a stench of stale beds and fresh garbage. Shayne walked into the hall. The odor reminded him of the worst men's rooms in Cairo on a hot day. Cockroaches stared at him on what passed for a hall rug. He had the feeling that if he stepped on one, its fellows would overwhelm him by sheer weight of numbers.

The landlady of the rooming house looked like an oversized cockroach herself. She hadn't combed her hair in a month, or washed her face in a year, Shayne decided. She was small, pig-eyed, and tough. She recognized a cop, even a private one all the way from Miami.

"Beat it," she said, and closed the door.

Shayne put his foot in the door.

"Tony Dimanche," Shayne said. "You can talk. He's dead."

"He was dead when he lived here, shamus," the landlady said. "A bum, even for this dump."

Shayne waved a ten dollar bill.

"A ten buys all there is about Tony," the loyal woman said. "He ain't worth ten. What do you want?"

"How long did he live here?"

"Six months, maybe less."

"Any visitors?"

"None, except two tramps from the local pick-up bar."

"No men?"

"Not even girls in pants," she said.

"What did he do?"

"You mean here? Nothing. He come and went. He slept here, mostly alone. Only—"

"Only what?"

The landlady paused, her eyes clicking dollars as she wondered if she could make a bid for another ten, or a five. She looked at Shayne, decided against it. Tony really wasn't worth it, she knew.

"Only he had money. He paid on time. That's like a miracle around here. And sometimes he dressed real good, better than when he moved in. I mean, near the end, before he beat it."

"When did he leave here?" Shayne asked.

"Maybe six months ago, something like that."

Shayne gave her the ten and walked out. He had learned little. Perhaps the local pick-up bar could offer more.

The bar was named *La Arriba,* but the bartender was Irish. At this time of the late morning it wasn't crowded, but it wasn't empty. The bartender leaned cosily toward Shayne, nodded toward the five small, dark men silently drinking colorless poison.

"Greetings, friend. You got the map of Ireland. All I get is them."

"Why do you work here if you don't like it?" Shayne said.

The bartender stared. "You crazy? They got money. They pay double for second-rate booze."

"Yeh," Shayne said drily. "I'm

a detective on a case. What do you know about Tony Dimanche?"

Shayne watched the bartender light up. He had guessed right on his approach. The bartender was flattered, and Tony Dimanche was non-Irish, so the bartender would tell all. Sometimes Shayne wondered why he was in a business where he had to use such methods and such people.

"Dimanche? Yeh, I remember the Dago punk. Came in regular up to about six months ago. Picked up two tramps who hang out here sometimes. That's all—he just boozed."

"Any friends?" Shayne asked.

"There was a dame. I remember, she come around asking after him later. He used to bring her in here sometimes; it made the two tramps mad."

"She came around later? Looking for him?" Shayne said.

"Yeh, maybe five or six times."

"You know her name? Where she lives?"

"Sure, name was Maria Vargas. I don't know where she lives, but I think she works in a sweat shop downtown. Maybe one of them Spics can tell you, only they don't speak so good the English."

The bartender laughed at his own joke, feeling very superior to little men who could not speak English. That his own English was less than an inch out of a gutter didn't seem to occur to him. Shayne turned to the five small men. He asked after Maria Vargas, and he spoke in Spanish. The bartender suddenly swore and glared at Shayne.

One of the small men looked at Shayne.

"Why you want Maria Vargas?" the man said in Spanish.

"Just to talk. There will be no troubles, my friend," Shayne said.

"Will there be a reward for the talk?" the man asked.

"For Maria Vargas there will be a reward, and for you there is a small reward," Shayne said. He held a five dollar bill. "For you and your friends, this token of trust."

The small man took the bill, gravely, nodded. "Much thanks. My friend Maria Vargas works at the A and D Dress Company, 444 East Broadway."

"Many thanks," Shayne said.

"It is nothing," the small man said.

VII

THE A AND D Dress Company was a sweat shop on the top two floors of a squat building that had been built before the turn of the century. The creaky elevator had probably been made of old muskets. In the office of the company, the straw boss was not pleased to see Shayne.

"Vargas? You want to talk, you wait for lunch. I got a schedule to keep."

Shayne decided that this one

would respond to neither money nor flattery. There was only one way to handle him. Shayne flashed his license.

"So have I, buster," Shayne said. "You want to be nice, or do I call some friends about this firetrap?"

"Beat it. I pay off," the foreman said.

"You want to pay off more? I can arrange it, chum," Shayne said.

The man hesitated, shrugged. "Okay, five minutes. We do piece work. She ain't gonna like you."

Maria Vargas was a small, pale brown girl with beautiful jet black hair and dark, luminous eyes. She looked a lot too good for Tony Dimanche, but love was hard to figure. When she spoke, she was obviously too good for this job she had, too, but that was the world she lived in.

"You want to know about Tony, Mr. Shayne? I can tell you little."

"You were his girl?"

"Yes, for a time. Tony was nervous, sort of funny acting. We were together for a time, then he was gone. I tried to find him, but I could not."

"This was about six months ago that he vanished?"

The girl nodded. "Yes. At first I thought nothing—it had happened many times before, but not for so long. I tried to find him but I could not."

"Did anything happen about the time he vanished?" Shayne asked.

Maria Vargas shrugged. "You mean police? No, there was nothing about the police that I knew. But—"

"But?" Shayne said quickly.

"There was something happening—some job, you understand? Perhaps three months before he was gone the Finger came to see him, and after that he had some money."

"The Finger?" Shayne said.

She nodded. "I do not know his real name. But you can find that from the police, I am sure. He arranges contacts for men like Tony with men who want to hire them."

"Anything else, Maria?"

The girl hesitated again. "Yes, one thing. Just before he was gone, he met me one day wearing very good clothes. A suit. He was very excited."

"That's all?"

"Yes," Maria Vargas said. She looked at Shayne. "He is dead, isn't he?"

Shayne nodded. "Yes."

"Yes," she said, "he would have to be. If he were alive, you would not be so interested in him. He is dead."

"He was—" Shayne began.

Maria Vargas said, "Do not tell me. He is dead, that is all. In my world, Mr. Shayne, death is very final. He is dead; it does not matter how he died. It does not matter that he lived at all. We have no time for memories in my world."

But she had memories. Shayne could see it in her eyes, in the stiff set of her shoulders as she walked back to her sewing machine. Shayne was not feeling good at all about his day so far. . . .

His old friend Lieutenant Naudes of New York Homicide thumbed through his files.

"I don't really need the file," Naudes said, "not for the Finger. But just in case, here it is."

Naudes sat down, opened the file.

"Eddie Bowers, alias the Finger and ten other names," Naudes read. "Fourteen arrests; only two felony convictions. Most charges reduced to misdemeanors. He took eight raps like that. He spends half his life in Rikers Island."

"Where do I find him?" Shayne asked.

"You don't, usually," Naudes said, "he finds you. Only you're in luck. He's inside right now."

"Inside?"

"Yeh, on Rikers Island again. Ninety days for running policy," Naudes said and looked up. "Is it important, Mike?"

Shayne told Naudes about the case. The lieutenant nodded slowly.

"Okay, then you can promise him thirty days off, okay? I can arrange that much."

"Will it be enough?" Shayne asked.

Naudes thought. "Maybe not. Contacts are the Finger's meat and potatoes. Okay, you can go as far as promising we'll drop another little charge we've got waiting for him. It's a Sullivan Act rap. He was heeled when we picked him up. He's not usually that careless, and it carries a big year or so."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," Shayne said.

"All in a good cause—we can pick Eddie up any time," Naudes said. "He's too old to change his ways; he'd starve to death." Naudes sighed. "I wonder how many people know that half of police work is waiting for informers to call you, and the other half is making deals with small fish to get big fish."

"Don't tell them," Shayne said. "It would shock them too much."

Rikers Island is in the East River. It is a pleasant island in summer, but the low grey buildings do not look pleasant at any time. They look like grey tombs, and that is what they are—tombs

for the living, or half-living. It is a special world, the world of men who live in prisons, with its own language and its own values.

Friends, relatives who have not met for years meet and cry tears of joy in Rikers Island. Uncle Joe is in again; too bad Cousin Tony isn't here, but he hit the street two days ago. If you have sixty days, maybe Cousin Tony will be back in time. It is that kind of world the Fixer, Eddie Bowers, lived in.

Bowers looked at Shayne suspiciously where they faced each other under the watchful eye of a guard. Thanks to Lieutenant Naudes, the interview was private except for the guard. This was not lost on Eddie Bowers.

"Okay, you're a cop and you want something," Bowers said, scowling.

"Just a private cop, Finger," Shayne said.

"A shamus! Cripes, just my luck," Bowers said. The fat little punk narrowed his pig eyes. "How you know where I was, shamus?"

"The police told me."

"Then you get a deal," Bowers said, more pleased.

"For the Finger," Shayne said.

"Who's that?"

"You," Shayne said.

"Never heard the name; you got rocks," Bowers said.

Shayne shrugged, pretended to stand up. "Then I'm in the wrong place; my deal is for the Finger."

"Okay, okay. Plant yourself down. So maybe they call me that sometimes. What's the deal?"

"Tony Dimanche," Shayne said.

Bowers' face fell. Obviously the fat little man had expected to be asked about someone more important than Tony Dimanche. Shayne made a mental note to tell Naudes that Bowers had some more interesting information to tell. But now his concern was Tony Dimanche.

"Tony's dead," Shayne said. "So don't worry."

"Dead? Someone got Tony?" Bowers said. Shayne could see that this made the fat little man even less happy. With no risk involved from Tony Dimanche, it cut Bowers' risk area down by half. Men like Bowers lived on the balance of value versus risk—the greater the value of information, and the risk involved, the more they could extract in deals and money. When the amount of reward just barely beat the degree of risk, they made a score.

"Not much deal, huh?" Bowers said.

"It depends. All I want to know right now is who you brought to contact Dimanche about seven or eight months ago."

Bowers narrowed his pig eyes. "That's a hard one, peeper. Tony wasn't worth much, only the contact's where I live, see? I make contacts and tell, I'm out of business."

Shayne considered. The first step in bargaining was to reduce the value of the information in the

eyes of the potential stool pigeon.

"This one shouldn't cost you an hour of sleep. I figure the contact had to be someone legitimate, no hoods. That means not much risk in telling, and not much chance anyone ever knows."

Bowers countered. "Yeah, but if the guy is legit, like you figure, then maybe I'm the only way you find out! There ain't no other pigeons."

"Thirty days off," Shayne said.

"Ninety," Bowers said. "The rest of my stretch."

"Lieutenant Naudes said thirty."

"Naudes himself?" Bowers said. "What else?"

"Is what you have worth any more?"

Bowers considered. The hood had a problem. If he had anything really good, he had to get all it was worth. On the other hand, if what he had was not really *that* good, and he overcharged, he might get the police angry and unwilling to deal with him in the future. All in all, it was better to give a little more than you got; that would pay off in future dealings.

"Okay, peeper, thirty days off. You got Naudes' word?"

"I have," Shayne said.

"Right," Bowers said. "Okay, here it is. I never knew the party's name. I got the word, around and about—you know how it is. I made the contact at Mardo's East. He called himself Mr. Smith. He knew his way around Mardo's—the place was his idea. He wanted a specialist in art or jewel heists. I gave him Tony. I arranged their first meet."

"Where?"

"Manny's Bar and Grill, on Third Avenue near Ninety-seventh Street."

"Just Mr. Smith. What description?"

"Big, white-haired, maybe sixty-five. Sharp nose, brown eyes; he didn't smile much. His clothes were real good, and he had that barber-shop-manicure look, you know? I mean, he looked real good, took real good care of himself."

"No name and no address?" Shayne said.

"You got all there is," Bowers said. "Unless you got some more to offer."

Bowers licked his lips nervously. This was the big pitch—one more piece of information, maybe the best, held for the last minute to get one more concession. Shayne could still make the offer of dropping the Sullivan charge. But he had a strong idea that if Bowers had really had something worth that much, the punk would have held out all along.

Shayne stood up. "No more, I'll tell Naudes you held out; you're not worth the thirty days off."

Bowers paled, stammered, and gave up.

"Okay, okay! Well, I followed Smith once, just once. He went to a club, the Belden Club on Madi-

son at 86th. It's one of those hot-shot old guys' joints, you know?"

"The Belden Club, okay," Shayne said. "I'll tell Naudes you co-operated."

"Thirty days off, right, Shamus?"

"That's what the man said."

Bowers nodded. "Okay, tell him okay."

Shayne got out of the fat little man's depressing company as soon as possible. The whole of Rikers Island depressed him. The prison was neither friendly nor dangerous. No dangerous men were kept here. It was a place for small-time losers, the men who were born petty losers and never went up or down.

Back on the mainland island of Manhattan, Shayne sat on a bench overlooking the East River Drive and the river. He considered how to approach the Belden Club. Private clubs did not give out names easily.

The man at the service entrance of the Belden Club saw the big, gaunt, red-headed man walk in the door. The big man wore a cap and a gaudy shirt. The man on the service entrance noted the metal change-dispenser on the big man's belt, the clip-board in his massive hand.

"Yes? What can I do for you?" the Belden Club man said.

"Maybe nothing," Shayne said, slurring his voice to sound like the taxi driver he was impersonating. "I drive a hack, see?"

"Swell," the Belden Club man said.

"I mean, I drive this hack," Shayne explained, "and this guy left his wallet. I checked out the three other guys it could be, and it ain't them. I mean, I know the wallet wasn't in my cab at nine o'clock, and it was at ten-thirty, see? So—"

"So get to the point, buddy. I got work to do," the Belden Club man said.

"So I dropped a fare here at this club, see?" Shayne said earnestly. "It's right on my sheet. Now this guy was old—maybe sixty-five, maybe more. He was big, white-haired, sharp nose like, brown eyes, I think. He was kind of serious and he dressed good."

"Let me see the wallet and I'll tell you if it belongs to one of our members," the Belden Club man said.

"Hell, no," Shayne said, pretending to be shrewd. "You give me some names, I'll tell you if they fit."

"Big, you say?" the Belden Club man said. "White-haired, not grey. But around sixty-five and a good dresser? It sounds like Mr. Menander."

"You sure?" Shayne said suspiciously.

"This is a small club. That description fits Mr. Joseph Menander."

"Yeh?" Shayne said, looking at the wallet he held now, looking very suspicious. "Where's he live?"

The Belden Club man was furious at this idiot by now. He blurted out without thinking.

"Twenty-seven East 83rd Street in the city. He has a country house in Oyster Bay, of course. Now will you hand over that wallet, if you don't mind?"

Shayne put the wallet into his pocket.

"Sorry," he said, "Menander ain't the right name. Thanks anyway."

And Shayne stalked out, leaving the Belden Club man speechless. Outside, the detective grinned for a moment, but then he strode to the nearest telephone to get to work. Mr. Joseph Menander was not in his New York apartment. It looked as if Shayne was about to take a long dusty trip to Oyster Bay.

VIII

THE COUNTRY estate of Mr. Joseph Menander was surrounded by a high iron fence, spiked at the top. The gate was massive, deserted—and locked solid. His car parked in a dark place down the road, Shayne walked slowly along the fence, looking for a place that would be easier to climb.

He found the place a quarter of a mile along the dark side road. A tree grew close to the fence, and a thick branch extended over the fence on the dark grounds. He checked his automatic, put it back into his shoulder holster. Then he moved carefully forward.

The grounds were large and covered with trees. The trees were old and tall, and beneath them the underbrush was thick, overgrown. Here and there paths wound through the grounds, but they were choked with tall weeds and heavy overgrowth. The estate was not in good condition, as if it had once been elegant, but had been neglected for a long time.

Shayne skirted a narrow arm of the Sound. A large white boathouse stood at the edge of the water. It had been allowed to fall into semi ruin, like the grounds themselves. Mike Shayne looked inside. There were no boats. The small feet of rats ran across the rotted wood.

Shayne left the boathouse behind and moved cautiously up a path that was less overgrown, showed more signs of recent travel. As he walked carefully, he became sharply aware of something he had been noticing since he climbed the fence—there was no sign of human presence on the estate. There had been no gatekeeper. Nothing human moved. There was no sign of men on the grounds, of a gardener. There was no light through the trees.

Taken with the condition of the grounds, the decay of the boathouse, the absence of boats, this lack of anyone on the estate pointed to one thing—Mr. Joseph Menander might be rich, but he had

once been richer, and he had spent no money on his estate for a long time. This fitted one of the prime requirements of the case—a rich man who was not too rich.

Shayne rounded a bend in the path, and the house stood before him. An enormous estate, timbered and pseudo-Tudor. It stood in the center of gardens that were in fair condition, as if a gardener came in to work once every month or so. A garage was open at the right, a single car inside. There was a light in two windows of the ground floor.

Shayne reached the house, moved through the soft earth of the garden. At the lighted windows he peered inside. The room was a study and library. Books reached from floor to ceiling—many of the books unbound, with the look of old manuscripts. Condition two, Joseph Menander was a collector of old and rare books!

Shayne watched for some time. No one entered the lighted room inside. This puzzled Shayne; there had been no other light in the house. Carefully, he made a circuit of the house. When he reached the rear, he saw the light in the windows of a room on the second floor—obviously a bedroom. Shayne began to look for a method of entry.

He found no simple way into the house. All windows that could be reached from the ground were locked. The doors were locked. He considered boldly knocking and making a direct approach, but he wanted to have a closer look at that library. Not that he expected to find the Gothic Manuscript openly there. No, if Menander was the buyer, and if he had already bought it from Prieto, the manuscript would be carefully hidden.

Still, there might be some evidence of a connection between Dimanche, Menander and Prieto. So the detective wanted a quiet entry. He took out the special ring of keys he always carried, and found a side door that looked dark and little used. The fifth key he tried opened the door. It creaked slightly, but Shayne waited in the dark of the side hall and heard nothing.

He moved along the dark hall and emerged in a wide, ghostly main entrance hall. He crossed this entrance hall and moved toward the line of light under the door that led into the library and study he had seen through the windows. He reached the door and put out his hand to open it.

He neither saw nor heard the man standing in the dark to his right, but he heard the man move. He reached for his gun. He was too late. Something heavy and resilient smashed against his head, and he fell. All lights and consciousness vanished . . .

At first, when he opened his eyes, all he could think of was what a sucker he had been. Obviously Menander, or whoever was in the house, had trapped him

neatly. The lighted library had been bait. And he had nibbled like a docile mouse.

When his anger at himself had subsided, he tried to move. He could not. He was tied securely to a chair. The room he was in was dim but lighted. It looked like a cellar room. Great racks for wine lined the walls. There was little in the racks, only a few dusty bottles. The only light was a single green-shaded bulb hanging on a long cord from the beamed ceiling.

But it was neither the empty wine racks nor the light that caught his attention. It was a man.

"So, you awake," the man said. "Good."

The man was slender, almost girlish-faced. His face was brown, shading into yellow. The eyelids proclaimed that he was of Mongol extraction. It was a face that could be any age, but a touch of gray at the temples told that the brown man was not young. Indonesian, or Malaysian, even Filipino, Shayne guessed. As Shayne watched, the slender little man reached up and pressed a button at the end of a long cord.

"Summoning the master," Shayne said. The sound of his own voice made his head throb. But the injury was not bad, the blow having been delivered expertly. Shayne guessed that it had been the small, lithe man who had hit him.

"You know how to sap a man," Shayne said.

The brown man said nothing. He just sat there impassive, waiting. Shayne studied him more closely. Even seated, the man seemed smooth, alert, dangerous. There was dirt under his fingernails that showed he did hard work, probably in the garden, but the man wore a white coat which indicated that he also served as some sort of houseboy.

"Menander's man Friday, eh?" Shayne said.

The brown little man did not even blink. Obviously he was not a nervous man, and could not be baited. Shayne saw no weapon in the man's hands. Whoever, or whatever, he was, the small man was confident that he could handle Shayne, a man twice his size, without weapons. Shayne was about to try again to make the man talk, when the door to the room opened.

The man who came in fitted Eddie Bowers's description exactly. A

tall old man with white hair and the well-preserved face of a rich man who could pay for care. A sharp nose, slightly hooked, that with his hard brown eyes gave him a hawklike appearance. His clothes were impeccable, seeming to have been perfectly molded to his broad shoulders. He was a big man. Without the white hair he would have seemed much younger than he was. But it was his brown eyes that Shayne stared at.

He had seen such eyes before. Alert, bright, but at the same time shallow, lacking a certain depth of intelligence. Eyes that seemed larger than they were, too large for the hawk face, nervous and yet strangely fixed. The eyes of a fanatic.

"Who are you?" the man said without preliminaries.

"I—" Shayne began.

"I could have you killed and thrown into the sea! To the fishes! How dare you trespass on my land!"'

The white-haired man paused as if for an answer, but Shayne knew that the man wanted no answers. The man was keyed-up, irrational.

"Because I have fallen upon evil days, you think you can come here with impunity!"

Shayne said nothing.

The old man hunched his big shoulders; his eyes became wily, shrewd. "Perhaps you think because I am old and no longer what I was, I am helpless? You reckoned without Dai Wuro, didn't you? Yes, Dai stays with me. Dai protects me!"

"He certainly does," Shayne said drily. He looked at the small brown man. "He sure knows his work."

The small Dai Wuro bowed, his face impassive.

Shayne watched the old man now. The sound of Shayne's voice this time seemed to have affected him. The brown eyes were still the eyes of a fanatic, but something had changed inside the old man. He seemed to become calmer, to know what he was doing.

"Who are you? Your credentials say you are Michael Shayne, a private investigator from Miami. What do you want here? Tell me exactly who you are!"

"I'm a man who knows about the Gothic Manuscript," Shayne said quietly.

The small Dai Wuro showed his first emotion, a faint flutter of his eyelids, a twitch on the left side of his brown face. But it was the old man who seemed struck by lightning. The old man turned as white as death, almost staggered. Then he recovered, opened his mouth, closed it again. His eyes blazed with an eagerness no one could have missed. He almost croaked when he finally spoke.

"You have it! The Gothic! You have it with you! Why didn't you say—"

"Untie me and we'll talk," Shayne said softly.

The impassive Dai Wuro shot an alarmed glance at the old man. It was the second show of emotion on the part of the brown little man. But the old man did not even notice. He waved the small Dai forward eagerly.

"Of course! Untie him! Hurry, Dai! Come, we'll go upstairs. You should have said you had the Gothic! I'd never have harmed you. Some brandy, perhaps, for an amend, yes?"

"Brandy will be fine," Shayne said.

The silent little Dai untied him.

"Return his possessions, Dai!"

Dai solemnly handed Shayne his money, wallet, keys and everything except his automatic. The small Oriental held the pistol and looked at his master. The old man nodded.

"Perhaps not the pistol, not yet. You understand, Mr. Shayne—a mere precaution."

Like a chameleon the old man had changed into something almost normal. The fanatical eyes still glowed, but his manner had become all politeness and charm. A well-bred man, who had already forgotten he had ever suggested feeding anyone to the fishes.

Shayne hoped the old man would not remember it when he found that he had jumped to conclusions, and that Shayne did not have the Gothic. The red-head would have felt better if he had his pistol. As it was, at least he was free.

He followed the old man up the stairs into the library.

IX

"WHERE DO you have it? The Gothic?" the old man demanded, eager, his eyes alight with a greed, a strange kind of greed.

They were seated comfortably in the library-study, brandies in the hands of the old man and Shayne. Dai Wuro was seated but alert, his straight chair near the door. Shayne already knew that the windows were locked. He smiled from his deep armchair toward the old man on the couch.

"You're Joseph Menander?" Shayne asked.

"Of course I am," Menander snapped. And the old man stopped. "You have to ask? Then how did you know to bring the Gothic to me?"

"I have ways," Shayne said. "You saw by my credentials that I am a private detective. The Gothic was stolen two days ago. Two men have been killed. I—"

"Yes, yes," Menander said. "Where is it? The manuscript!"

Shayne watched Menander. "Doesn't it concern you that murder is involved?"

Dai Wuro suddenly spoke in some language Shayne did not know. Menander's eyes narrowed,

became shrewd. The fanaticism was still there, but the man was under control now.

"Murder? I'm sure I don't understand, Mr. Shayne? You said you came to sell me the Gothic."

"No, I said I know about it," Shayne said.

Menander pressed his fingertips together, in full control now. Obviously his peculiar form of madness occurred only in connection with his fanatic passion for old manuscripts. The old man studied Shayne.

"You know about it? Is that intended to mean something of import to me, Mr. Shayne?" Menander said.

"It should, I think. One of the murdered men was Tony Dimanche. The other was Dr. Thomas Morgan himself."

"Morgan? I didn't know that. That is unfortunate," Menander said. "But why do you bother to tell me this? How can I be involved? I never met Dr. Morgan, and I have not left this house in a month."

"Waiting for Prieto and Dimanche? Waiting to get the Gothic from your hired thieves?"

Menander blinked, but his eyes were steady. Only Dai Wuro shifted ominously in his seat this time.

"I know no one named Prieto, Mr. Shayne," Menander said.

"And Tony Dimanche?"

Menander laughed as Dai Wuro hissed again in the strange language. The old man waved the small Oriental to silence. Shayne watched Menander. The old man seemed to be becoming manic now. There was an airy confidence in his manner. He was now playing the shrewd and skillful intriguer. It was a role Shayne liked to see. Overconfidence helped.

"I believe you said Dimanche was dead, Mr. Shayne."

"He is, shot trying to steal the Gothic. By Dr. Morgan. Prieto killed Morgan later," Shayne said.

"Well then, since I don't know any Prieto, and since Tony Dimanche is dead, I can't be connected to any of this. What I say can never be proved, can it? Providing you ever leave here to tell it at all. No, I believe I can admit knowing Tony Dimanche, since you obviously found me through him."

The old man smiled smugly. Shayne had to admit that Menander was right. All Menander had to do was deny everything, and Shayne could prove nothing.

"So you admit hiring Tony Dimanche to steal the Gothic?"

"Why not?" Menander smiled. "You see, Mr. Shayne, I love beautiful things. But I particularly love unique things, old things, treasures untouched by our vulgar age. When that vulgar Morgan person discovered the Gothic, I knew I had to have it. I offered him all I could. He turned me down."

The old man's eyes clouded for

a moment. "I was very rich once, but—I don't quite know how—it went, much of it, the money. I bought many treasures. That is what money is for. Still, I do not have what I once had, you see. I could not offer enough to Morgan. Of course, I had agents make the offers. They failed me!"

The old man passed his hand across his eyes. "So I made inquiries and found Tony Dimanche. He was no fool; he asked $25,000 to steal the Gothic. It was cheap at the price. I hired him, and he promised me he would steal it. I had to have it, you understand?"

There was a silence in the comfortable room in the big mansion. Not a sound came from anywhere in the halls and rooms that must have once echoed to voices and the feet of many servants. In a way, Shayne felt sorry for Joseph Menander. The old man was at least partly insane, and he had planned only to steal. Yet his plan had led to two deaths—so far.

"So you hired Tony Dimanche to steal the Gothic. You had no intention of ever exhibiting it. You simply wanted to own it," Shayne said.

"Exhibit it? Why? To whom? Who could appreciate it as much as I?" Menander cried.

"But Dimanche is dead, and Prieto has the manuscript. You say you don't know Prieto, yet it looks like he and Dimanche were working together."

But the old man seemed not to hear. There was another thought in his eyes, the eyes shading again into the fanaticism.

"Has the Gothic? You say this Prieto *has* the manuscript? The police don't have it—it is missing?" Menander said.

"So far it's missing," Shayne said.

Joseph Menander leaned forward. "Who hired you? Who are you working for? No, never mind —I don't want to know. Listen to me, Mr. Shayne. I'll pay *you* the $25,000 if you get me the Gothic. Yes, that's it. You find the Gothic and bring it to me, and I'll pay the $25,000 to you."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. The old fanatic did not give up easily.

"This is murder now, Mr. Menander," Shayne said.

The old man waved his hand imperiously. "Solve your ridiculous murders, by all means. What do I care?" Menander said. "Find your criminals, yes—but find the Gothic for me! You can sell it to me!"

"How could I do that?" Shayne asked, drawing the old man out. "The police know I am looking for it."

Menander became shrewd, conspiratorial again. "Simple. When you catch this Prieto person, or whoever has my manuscript, you simply pretend that the Gothic was destroyed! Burned, yes! In the struggle, you see? They will believe you. Burn some old but useless manuscript! Bring the Gothic to me now, and I will pay you twenty-five thousand dollars!"

"How could I be sure you would pay me? You know that if I was caught, it would mean my license. How could I trust you?"

Shayne spoke as if he was thinking about Menander's offer. He wanted to draw the old man out as far as he could. The same point still eluded him—the actual connection between the people in the case. Dimanche and Prieto were apparently in it together, yet Menander did not know Prieto. Assuming that Menander was not lying, then why had Tony Dimanche not mentioned Prieto to Menander?

Dimanche must have had some method of contacting Menander, and Prieto must have known it. Prieto had to sell the Gothic; and there would hardly be two fanatics ready to buy the Gothic illicitly. So Prieto would have to contact Menander, and yet Menander did not know Prieto. Why? And would $25,000 be good enough for Prieto? Shayne doubted that.

"How were you to contact Dimanche, or how was he to contact you when he had the Gothic?" Shayne said.

The old man leaned half out of his seat on the couch. "Of course, Dimanche, too, was distrustful. So I assumed the risk. Once I heard that the Gothic had been stolen, I was to run an advertisement in *The New York Times* saying, 'Come home, Sunday, morning awaits, and I would add a number. The number was a room number at the Hotel Van Dyke.

"Dimanche would go to the Hotel Van Dyke and ask for a package in his name in the box of that room number. It would contain the money. Then he would leave a package in the box that contained the Gothic."

Menander stared hard at Shayne. "I took the risk, but I made it clear that if he cheated me, Dai Wuro would find him and kill him very slowly. Dai Wuro is an expert. I will make the same ar-

rangement with you, and give you the same warning."

Shayne glanced toward the impenetrable face of Dai Wuro. He was convinced that the Oriental would do just as Menander said, and that Dai Wuro was an expert. Menander saw Shayne look at the small brown man.

"Yes, Mr. Shayne, he will do it," Menander said. "Dai is Malaysian. He can do more with a knife than you have ever dreamed of. Be sensible, bring me the Gothic and the money is yours."

"A whole $25,000 for a manuscript that is practically without price? That doesn't sound so good."

It was a chance remark, no more. Tony Dimanche would have been satisfied with $25,000 for a simple stealing. But when Shayne said that, Menander blanched, reddened, stood up. The old man's eyes blazed.

His big body shook with rage, and a little fear. The Malaysian seemed alarmed.

"All right! All right, you swine! I'll pay the whole $150,000! It's all I have left, but I'll pay it! I must have that Gothic Manuscript. It is the final achievement of my life to have it! Take your filthy money. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars—that is all I have!"

The old man seemed to sway, his big body shaking. He rubbed his eyes. Shayne looked at him. Now it was all a different matter. With $150,000 dollars involved, something had changed. Priceless is a word without meaning, and men lived in a world of practical meaning. For $25,000 only a small-time professional like Tony Dimanche would steal the Gothic. But for $150,000, all the old man had, almost anyone might have decided to steal it and sell it.

"Who asked for $150,000, Menander? Not Tony Dimanche. Who upped the price on you?" Shayne demanded. "Prieto?"

That could explain some of the association between Prieto and Dimanche. Or could it? Why would Dimanche need Prieto? How did Prieto learn of the deal with Menander, or had he? How—

The old man's eyes were suddenly insane again. Menander almost screamed.

"Take him out, Dai! Get rid of him! They're all the same! He'll never get me the Gothic! Take him out. Kill him!"

Shayne whirled, but the small Malaysian was too fast. Dai Wuro held Shayne's own automatic pointing at the detective. The Malaysian motioned with the automatic.

"Come," Dai Wuro said.

Shayne hesitated, looked for an escape. There was no escape in this room.

"Come," Dai Wuro repeated, his flat voice as expressionless as his thin brown face.

Shayne walked to the door and out into the night.

X

SHAYNE WALKED across the overgrown grounds of the estate toward a line of dark trees. Behind him the small, dark figure of Dai Wuro was no more than a vague shadow in the night. A silent, but deadly shadow. Without moving his head, Shayne let his eyes look all around him. Soon, he would have to make his move.

But he had no chance, and the small Malaysian continued to walk him through the night. It seemed to Shayne that they walked for an hour. The house had long since vanished behind them. The sound of the inlet was off to the right, but coming no closer. As they reached a heavy thicket of trees, the silent Malaysian behind him suddenly spoke.

"Stop here. Turn around."

The voice of Dai Wuro was neither menacing nor friendly, neither hard nor soft. It was a simple, straight, unemotional voice telling him to stop. He stopped, turned around, tensed his body for one sudden leap.

Dai Wuro held the automatic in his left hand, a long, wavy, razor-sharp *kris* in the right hand.

Shayne waited, gathered his muscles.

"Here," the Malaysian said.

With a flick of his hand, Dai Wuro ejected the clip from Shayne's heavy automatic. With another flick, using both hands now, but still holding the *kris,* the Malaysian ejected the bullet from the chamber. He held the automatic out to Shayne.

"Take it and go," Dai Wuro said simply.

Shayne took the gun. He placed it in his shoulder holster without loading it or even looking at it. He was looking at Dai Wuro. The small brown man still held his *kris* ready.

"Why?" Shayne said.

"For the good of Mr. Menander I would do anything, but this would not be good for him. It would not help," the Malaysian said.

Dai Wuro spoke perfect English. Shayne looked at the small man. There was intelligence in the brown eyes, and great strength—the strength of a man who would do what he had to do without an instant of hesitation, no matter what the risk to himself. But there was more: there was gentleness and a great compassion.

"You think a lot of Menander," Shayne said.

"I have been with him a long time, Mr. Shayne. He was not always as he is. He was a great man," the Malaysian said. "Now he is sick. I will not hurt him. No one will hurt him."

"This is a murder case, Dai Wuro," Shayne said.

"Mr. Menander is not involved. The police could suggest only conspiracy to robbery, and without Dimanche not even that."

"No, but what of the murderer? Two men have been killed for that manuscript."

The Malaysian smiled. "No one will kill the *tuan*."

Shayne believed that. He would have hated to be a man attempting to kill Menander and meeting Dai Wuro for the first time. But the red-head had a case to solve. He had to learn what Dai Wuro might know.

"I wouldn't want it to come to that," Shayne said. "I want to catch the murderer and thief before he ever comes here."

There was a silence. The brown eyes of the Malaysian seemed to bore through Shayne. At last Dai Wuro nodded.

"What more do you want to know?"

"Who upped the price to one hundred and fifty thousand dollars?" Shayne said.

"I do not know. It was very secret. The Dimanche person never told us his name."

"Dimanche became a go-between?" Shayne snapped.

"Yes. Let me explain. Mr. Menander hired the Dimanche person to steal the Gothic about six or seven months ago. At first Dimanche said it would take less than a month. He was most confident. One night he said it would be very soon, Mr. Menander should have the money ready. He—"

Shayne stared at Dai Wuro. "Six or seven months ago? All that time?"

"Yes. The Gothic was here in New York at Morgan's apartment. Dimanche acted as if the theft would be within days. Then there was a silence, perhaps a week. At last Dimanche contacted us and said everything was changed; all was off unless the price would be two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

"*Tuan* could not pay that. It is more than we have left. But with the estate, a little more, he could borrow one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. He made that offer. As you have seen, *tuan* is not well now. I remonstrated, but he is like a child. He agreed to pay one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Dimanche said that would suffice, but that it would take time."

Shayne tugged hard on his earlobe. "Time? He said it would take time? That must have meant a plan. Prieto joined Morgan just about that time! You're sure you never heard of Prieto?"

"Not until we read his name in the papers of Miami," Dai Wuro said. "We were just to wait until we read of the theft. Then we were to place that advertisement, as *tuan* told you."

"You read it? Did you place the advertisement?"

"Yes, for three days. That is why we were waiting. We expected a visitor, but not one who came

by stealth. That is why I attacked you."

"But at the Van Dyke? There was no pickup of the money?"

"No, it is still there. I made certain tonight before you came. We have a trusted man on watch," Dai Wuro said. "We do not wish to be seen there."

"No one has contacted you?"

"No one has come but you, Mr. Shayne," Dai Wuro said.

Shayne said nothing. We was trying to think—trying to think of something that was buzzing like a wasp in his mind. Something someone had said, and that explained all of it. But it would not come.

"Now I must return to *tuan* Joseph," Dai Wuro said.

Shayne nodded. Someone had explained it all without knowing it.

"Mr. Shayne," Dai Wuro said evenly, "please do not harm the *tuan*. No one will harm him while I live."

"No," Shayne said.

The small figure of the Malaysian had vanished long before Shayne finally turned and went out through the gate that opened from inside.

He walked slowly to his car and drove back to the city.

Ed Landers opened the door of his apartment and Shayne strode in. The insurance investigator had a drink in his hand. Landers made one for Shayne, a brandy and soda. Landers had known Shayne a long time.

"You look like you need it," Landers said.

"I do," Shayne said, and grinned. "I noticed you're still awake."

"I was waiting for you. Did you find him? The buyer?"

"I found him," Shayne said.

"Feed it to me slow."

Shayne gave it slow and by details. Landers listened carefully. When Shayne had finished, the room was as quiet as a tomb. Landers seemed to think for a long time. Then the insurance investigators sighed.

"So it didn't solve the case," Landers said. "I mean finding the buyer. I thought it would. Damn it, Mike, I don't get the pattern. Let's go over what we know."

Shayne nodded, his legs stretched wearily in front of him, the good brandy and soda in his massive hand. He made his mind go blank, empty, and listened to Landers. Landers leaned forward in his chair, the night sounds of New York faint outside his window.

"Menander hires Tony Dimanche to steal the Gothic Manuscript. Dimanche wants twenty-five thousand dollars to deliver. That was about seven months ago, more or less. Dimanche indicated that all was well; the manuscript would be in Menander's hands any day. But then Menander didn't hear from Tony for about a week.

"When he did finally hear, it

had all changed. Now Tony wanted one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and it would take time. Time, mind you. Which sounds as if Tony was sure he could get the Gothic, but there had to be a delay. Now—"

Shayne held up his massive hand. "Hold it. Not one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It was two hundred and fifty thousand dollars Dimanche asked for the second time, the time he settled for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars." Shayne's grey eyes were eager. "Why two hundred and fifty thousand dollars? That's the exact amount of the insurance! Together they make a cool half a million. And what could have happened to make a small-time punk like Tony Dimanche suddenly up the ante that much?"

Landers rubbed his chin. "Well, maybe he found out how really valuable it was?"

"He knew that already," Shayne snapped. "No, it wasn't *Tony* who upped the ante; it was someone else! That's it, Ed. That's what happened. Someone else got into the act. That explains the week delay. Two thefts—you see? I said that myself once during all this. *Tony Dimanche was caught stealing the first time!*"

"And the man who caught him joined him! Made him tell about Menander, and the new accomplice upped the ante," Landers said.

"Which made Tony sure he had the Gothic, but time was needed to create a good cover-up for the new man," Shayne said.

"Prieto!" Landers said.

"Sure, who else? He was right there," Shayne said. "He caught Dimanche in the act. He had Tony cold. But instead of turning Tony in to the police, he joined him. Why? Because the one thing that was hard to find was a buyer for something as rare and well-known as the Gothic! Tony had the buyer."

Landers was elated. "It all fits!"

Mike Shayne swore. Suddenly the big red-head stood up and began to pace. He swore like a sergeant with heartburn.

"No, it doesn't fit!" Shayne said. "If Prieto and Tony had been in it together, why hasn't Prieto contacted Menander? Whoever has that manuscript doesn't know how to contact the buyer. And how does Morgan's killing fit in?"

Now Lander's swore. "And Prieto has only been with Morgan six months! Besides, if it was Prieto, why the long delay? I mean, how does that six month delay fit in? And the killing just doesn't make sense if Prieto had the manuscript in his possession and knew where to sell it."

The big red-head tugged very deliberately on his left earlobe. His grey eyes looked at Landers, but they were seeing something else, something very far away or

very deep inside himself. He turned a step toward Landers.

"The killing, that's it," he said softly. "Both killings. Ed, go and check all your reports on this. Check the dates. When did Prieto join Morgan's staff?"

Landers left the room with his hat on to go to his office. Shayne waited in silence for a time, then he put in a call to the Oyster Bay estate of Joseph Menander. He talked for a time to the soft-voiced Dai Wuro. When he hung up, his eyes were steel points. He waited. Three drinks later, Landers returned.

"Maxwell Prieto joined Morgan just less than six months ago, on January twenty-seventh," Landers aid.

"And Tony Dimanche upped the ante after a week's silence on January sixteenth, more than a week before Prieto showed up," Shayne said. "I just talked to Menander's house."

Landers dropped into a chair without taking off his hat. The insurance investigator lighted a cigarette and looked out at the city through his high window.

"Where does that leave us?" Landers said.

"It leaves us where we should have been all along," Shayne said. "The only really logical thief—Thomas Morgan himself."

"A dead man. That's great," Landers said.

Shayne sipped at his drink. "It had to be Morgan all along. I was thrown off by his killing, and by Prieto. But do you remember what you said earlier, Ed?"

"What did I say?"

"That the theft and the killing didn't fit," Shayne said. "I just remembered that."

"I must be smart to have said it, but what does it mean?" Landers said wearily.

"Take it without the killing," Shayne said. "If Morgan had not been killed, think what we'd have now. Tony Dimanche was hired to steal the Gothic from Morgan. Dimanche was satisfied with twenty-five thousand dollars—he said he just about had the Gothic. Then he vanished for a week. When he showed up again to talk to Menander, the ante was up to two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

Shayne lighted a cigarette, and the blue-white smoke of both cigarettes swirled in the quiet room. Shayne went on. "Note that amount—two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. With the insurance a cool half a million, worth robbery and murder. It had to be Morgan who caught Dimanche in the act—*Morgan is the only one in the case who really gained by stealing the Gothic.* He got Menander's money and the insurance."

Landers blew smoke into the air. "Why, Mike?"

"Who knows? With Morgan and

Tony Dimanche dead, we'll never really know. But I can guess," Shayne said. "Morgan was almost a fanatic about his Gothic, too. He was also greedy for money. The Gothic was his fame and his income. But six governments were after it; the pressure was heavy. The Egyptians might even be close to winning the legal right to the manuscript.

"They probably couldn't make their claim stick as long as Morgan had the manuscript, but it would have ruined his reputation. Maybe the Egyptians would try to get it—and then Morgan would be out both manuscript and income and for nothing. He couldn't sell it for as much as he thought he should get. Then Dimanche tried to steal it.

"That gave Morgan the idea—there was an illicit buyer! If the manuscript was stolen, Morgan got the insurance, plus all that Menander would pay, and he had the satisfaction of effectively keeping anyone else from having the Gothic. After all, five hundred thousand dollars is a soothing figure if he had to lose the Gothic, and the actual four hundred thousand dollars Morgan settled for isn't bad either."

Shayne drew on his cigarette and watched the smoke swirl in the room. "It's all that makes good sense, Ed. It had to be Morgan himself who caught Tony Dimanche and saw his chance. For the original twenty-five thousand dollars, plus Morgan's silence about the first robbery attempt, Dimanche would have done anything."

"And then Prieto killed Morgan," Landers said. "Now it fits. Prieto got wind of the whole deal. When Morgan staged the second theft, Prieto stepped in and killed Dimanche and took the Gothic. Later he killed Morgan because Morgan knew too much."

Landers stood up, excited. "That's it then. Prieto has the Gothic. All we have to do is find him."

Shayne did not move. His grey eyes looked up at Landers.

"No," Shayne said. "Prieto doesn't have the Gothic. Prieto didn't kill anyone."

XI

LANDERS looked at Shayne as if he was sure that the red-head had lost his mind. The insurance agent was becoming angry with all the talk.

"Damn it, Mike, it fits like a glove!"

"No, Ed, it doesn't," Shayne said grimly. "First, Morgan shot Dimanche. He had the gun, and he admitted it! Why would he cover for Prieto?"

Landers thought. "Well, maybe to make a deal with Prieto. Half a loaf is better than nothing. Prieto couldn't get his hands on the insurance money. Morgan covered

up on the killing of Dimanche in order to deal with Prieto."

"Then why would Prieto kill Morgan?" Shayne said. "If he already had the Gothic?"

"Well—" Landers began.

"One more thing," Shayne went on. "Tell me, if you were planning a faked robbery with Dimanche, would you go out and hire a new personal secretary, someone who would work very closely with you? Why the devil would Morgan risk discovery by bringing in Prieto just after he made his deal with Dimanche?"

Landers sighed and sat down hard. "It would have been stupid. But Morgan did it, damn it."

"Still another thing," Shayne went on inexorably. "Prieto was a fake; his credentials are all phony. The police checked that out absolutely. Why? I mean, Prieto was hired after Morgan and Dimanche made their deal. He couldn't have known there was a deal. Who was he—and what was he doing there at all?"

"Maybe he got wind of the deal from outside and decided to get in on it," Landers said.

"Maybe, but that still leaves us with the question of just why Morgan was so stupid as to hire him at that time," Shayne said.

The silence in the apartment was as thick as a fog. Shayne was watching Landers. The insurance man was trying to think and getting nowhere. The only sound was the distant traffic of the city and the clink of ice in glasses. At last it was Landers who broke the silence.

"Do you have an idea, Mike?"

"Yes," Shayne said, "I have an idea, but it isn't going to be easy to prove. I think I know just how Prieto fits, and who killed Morgan. I think I know who has the Gothic. But I don't know for sure how to smoke it open."

"You want to tell me?"

"Not yet, Ed, I'm guessing, and it's pretty wild. I'm going to have to find the Gothic and break it all in a rush."

"Okay, how?"

"There's only one way," Shayne said. "Greed. The killer has the Gothic. We've got to make him think he can sell it."

Landers swore. "How? If the killer doesn't know Menander's signals?"

"If the killer doesn't know Menander's signal, then he doesn't know Menander exists," Shayne said. "All he knows is that Morgan must have had someone to sell it to."

"So?"

"So we give him a buyer," "Shayne said. "We go down to Miami, and we get in touch."

Landers frowned. "What if the killer does know about Menander and the signal, but is just playing it safe for a while? If we contact, we'll tip our hand."

"No," Shayne said. "We'll use

Menander. Our killer might run a check anyway. We'll make it as real as possible."

"Okay," Landers said. "Let's go."

The letter was innocent, a simple note of condolence. It came, apparently, from Mr. Joseph Menander, the once well-known collector of old manuscripts. It read, "My deepest sympathy on the death of a close friend. It was always rewarding to do business with Dr. Morgan. I shall call personally when I am in Miami, at The Milton Hotel, next Wednesday. Feel free to call on me. I will be glad to continue what Dr. Morgan and I started. Sincerely, Joseph Menander."

The letter was sent to Sheila Morgan at the suite in the hotel where she was still staying. Shayne sent it and sat back to wait for results. He was sure that all of them would see it. But to be certain he sent equally innocent letters to *all* those involved: Sheila Morgan, George Morgan, Frank Short, and Deirdre Brian. Then he engaged a hotel room at the Milton Hotel on the Wednesday indicated, and waited for the contact.

Three days passed. There was no call. In the room, Ed Landers was becoming discouraged. The insurance investigator paced up and down like a caged lion. Shayne watched him.

"It's not working," Landers said.

"Give it time," Shayne said. "Our man is a killer. He'll check in New York. I've got Dai Wuro alerted to give him a good story. Dai will keep Menander away. If our man checks personally, Menander will be missing all right."

"And we wait?"

"We wait," Shayne said. "That's the detective game, Ed. Ten percent thinking, and ninety percent waiting."

"If I can stand it," Landers said.

"Maybe we'll light a small fire," Shayne said, reaching for the telephone.

He called Chief Will Gentry. That afternoon *The Miami Daily News,* under the by-line of Shayne's reporter friend Tim Rourke, carried the news that Maxwell Prieto had been traced; an arrest was imminent. Prieto was said to still be in Miami, apparently waiting for a contact, according to Chief Will Gentry.

Seven hours later, a dark night over Miami, the call came. Shayne let Landers answer the telephone; his own voice might be recognized. Landers made his voice sound as old as possible.

"Yes? Yes, this is Joseph Menander."

Shayne listened on the extension. The voice at the other end of the line was muffled, heavily disguised. Shayne could not tell if it was a man or a woman.

"I'm a friend of Thomas Morgan's," the voice said.

"A sad thing," Landers said, his voice disguised as Menander.

The distant voice hesitated. "A great loss, the Gothic."

"Yes," Landers said, pretending to be careful. "Perhaps it will be found. It is worth a lot of money."

"How much would you say, Mr. Menander?" the voice said.

"Priceless, but possibly $150,000 would begin to reach the value," Landers said. "Poor Dr. Morgan once said that was a possible price."

There was a silence. Then the voice dropped its pretense.

"How?" the voice said.

"The same way," Landers said. "Bring the item to the hotel. Leave it in the box for room 452. A package will be in the box, ready for you. In the lobby no one can hide."

"Put the package there now," the muffled voice said, and was gone.

Ten minutes later the package that appeared to contain $150,000 was in the box of Room 452. Shayne was out of sight. Landers, disguised behind old-man-make-up sat in the lobby. An hour passed. People came and went, but the package was still there.

Two hours passed.

Three hours.

In his hiding place, Shayne was becoming cramped. His gaze had never left the box across the lobby. Then he saw the bellboy. The young man crossed the lobby carrying a package. Shayne watched the bellboy go to the desk. The desk clerk took the package, placed it in the box of Room 452, and gave the bellboy the package of money. Shayne watched Landers get up and stroll out in front of the bellboy.

The bellboy followed Landers out into the street. Shayne left his hiding place and followed the bellboy at a discreet distance. When he got outside, he saw the bellboy hand the package to a young man Shayne did not know. The young man hailed a taxi and drove off. Shayne saw Landers' car follow the taxi. In his car, Shayne followed Landers.

The silent chase ended on a dark street corner near Biscayne Bay. The taxi stopped. The young man got out, and a shadowy figure approached the young man. As the young man handed over the package that supposedly contained money, Ed Landers stepped forward and held a pistol on the shadowy figure. Shayne walked up.

"What is all this!" Sheila Morgan demanded.

"An arrest for murder," Shayne said to the widow.

XII

THEY ALL sat in Chief Will Gentry's office. Deirdre Brian stared in horror at Sheila Morgan. George Morgan was white as death. Frank

Short stood against the wall across the big office from the others. The young man who had taken the package from the bellboy sat in a chair in front of Gentry's desk. Gentry held the large sheets of ancient vellum that was the Gothic Manuscript.

"She gave me that package, told me to get a bellboy to deliver it to the box of Room four fifty two and pick up the package there," the scared young man said. "She paid me fifty dollars."

Gentry, Landers and Shayne all looked at Sheila Morgan. The widow lighted a cigarette. Her hands were steady.

"Why not?" she said. "It's mine now. I have a right to sell it."

"And claim the insurance too?" Landers said.

Sheila Morgan smiled. "I haven't claimed the insurance yet. I've done nothing wrong."

Gentry and Landers looked at Shayne. The gaunt face of the redhead was impassive. He turned his deadly grey eyes toward Sheila Morgan.

"You had the Gothic, Mrs. Morgan," Shayne said.

"I found it after Thomas was killed. I suppose Prieto was after it, but I came in before he could get it after killing Tom. Obviously all three of them were involved in the fake theft, wouldn't you say, Mr. Shayne?"

The woman smiled, confident that they could prove nothing. Chief Gentry looked worried. Ed Landers' face was red with frustration. Shayne did not move his glance from the smiling woman.

"No," Shayne said, "only two of them. Morgan and Tony Dimanche planned the theft. Morgan killed Dimanche and kept the manuscript."

Frank Short swore. "Damn it, Shayne, Prieto ran! Morgan told the story!"

Shayne nodded. "Yes, Morgan told the story. And then Mrs. Morgan saw Prieto kill Morgan, right?"

"I did," Sheila Morgan said.

"No," Shayne said. "You didn't see Prieto kill Morgan. There is no Maxwell Prieto! He doesn't exist!"

Even Will Gentry stared at Shayne in the silence that fell over the big office of the Miami Chief of Police. Landers blinked. Frank Short stepped away from the wall, his mouth open as if about to speak. Deirdre Brian's eyes widened. George Morgan half stood. Shayne nodded slowly as he went on.

"That's why I knew that whoever had the Gothic was the killer. And that's why I knew it had to be Sheila Morgan. You see, only one explanation fits all the facts. Morgan caught Dimanche trying to steal the Gothic six months or so ago in New York. He learned about Menander, and he cooked up a scheme.

"If Tony Dimanche had simply stolen the Gothic, the police might

have eventually found him and found Morgan's involvement. But if the police had a third party to look for, Morgan would be safe. So he created Maxwell Prieto, and disguised Tony Dimanche as Prieto!"

Shayne turned to Will Gentry. "I think if you take a picture of the dead Dimanche, Will, and put a beard and a scar on it, you'll have a man who looks exactly like Prieto. I remember Deirdre Brian telling me that Prieto acted peculiar; he didn't seem like what he was supposed to be.

"Dimanche hadn't been seen for six months. He couldn't be, he was playing the part of Prieto. Morgan planned it all the way. He killed Dimanche and sent us looking for the non-existent Prieto. He faked all the credentials himself. It is the only explanation for Prieto being in on the act at all. It almost worked. Dimanche was a known criminal; Prieto was missing. It looked completely probable that it all happened as Morgan said.

"Deirdre Brian will identify the doctored picture of Dimanche. Now that we know, we should be able to have the New York police find where Morgan got his faked credentials for Prieto. So you see, Sheila Morgan is lying. She didn't see Prieto kill Morgan because there is no Prieto. She had the Gothic.

"I imagine she knew where it was, and she walked into the suite first and killed Morgan herself. No one searched her for the gun. No one else saw Prieto, so there is no other—"

Sheila Morgan leaped to her feet. "No! I didn't kill him! Deirdre saw a man running away, remember?"

"Suggestion," Shayne said blandly. "It had to be you. You were alone in the suite for a minute or so, you said you saw Prieto when he doesn't exist. No, it has to be—"

"No!" the woman cried, white, shaking. "Not me, it was Frank! I can prove it. I saw Frank Short. He's still got the gun in his room! I'll—"

Frank Short did not have the pistol in his room—he had it in his pocket. He got it out and no more. Shayne's big hand clamped on his wrist; his other hand smashed the tall man to the floor. Three uniformed policemen ran into the office and held Short down.

"There!" Sheila Morgan cried. "You see! It was Frank all the time."

"Yes," Shayne said. "It was Short, but you planned it. You had the Gothic, and you did the lying about Prieto. You're as guilty as Short, Mrs. Morgan."

The widow fell to the floor in a dead faint.

LANDERS, SHAYNE and Lieutenant Bruce all sat in the bright morning sun of Will Gentry's big

office. Gentry was shaking his head.

"The gun checked out; Short is talking," the Miami Chief of Police said. "New York is working on the Prieto credentials. The Brian woman identified the doctored picture of Dimanche, just as you said, Mike."

"It was the only possible reason for Prieto to exist," Shayne said. "As a fake decoy. It was a hell of a good plan. If Morgan hadn't been killed, I think he'd have gotten away with it. But the killing of Morgan just didn't fit, as Landers said."

Gentry nodded. "It really had nothing to do with the theft. Sheila Morgan just happened to see Morgan with the Gothic, and cooked up her scheme. All she and Short really wanted was to get rid of Morgan because they were in love. They thought they could eliminate Morgan, get the insurnce money, and sit pretty. Taking the Gothic was necessary to make Prieto look guilty. Then they got greedy and tried to sell it."

"That was their mistake," Bruce said.

"Mistakes are what catch killers," Shayne said drily.

Gentry sighed. "Lovers. Now they can't wait to ruin each other by talking."

Shayne stood up. "I guess that does it, Will. George Morgan gets the Gothic. He's going to sell it to Harvard University at a fair price. Landers saves two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for his company, and you have two killers. Morgan got his own punishment for killing Tony Dimanche."

Shayne turned to leave. Ed Landers stood to follow. Will Gentry's voice was sharp.

"What about Menander, Mike? He's guilty," Gentry said.

Shayne did not turn. "I guess he is, but I won't blow the whistle."

"Mike, you can't—" Gentry began.

Shayne turned. "Why can't I? You have no proof except my story. He's an old man, half insane, but he's not really bad or dangerous. If anyone tried to take him, Dai Wuro would fight. I don't see why we should make Dai a killer or a corpse. He swears he will take care of Menander, not let this sort of thing happen again."

"Mike?" Gentry said.

"No, Will. I like that Malaysian. I won't hurt him," Shayne said.

The big redhead stalked from the office with Landers behind him. Will Gentry watched them go. The bluff Chief of Police reached for the telephone, stopped, and then slowly lighted a black cigar and leaned back to smoke it. After all, with Dimanche dead, there was no proof. Later he would call New York and tell them to keep an eye on Menander. That was all. He owed Mike Shayne that much, after all.

THE NAME OF THE GAME IS DEATH

"In our business, Death is king. You live with it, you accept it, you follow it. And—you do not look back—or you too could die, like the rest . . ."

by JANET R. McQUISTON

IT WAS twenty minutes after five o'clock in the afternoon when I registered at the desk of the down town Seattle hotel. I used my legal name, Toni Target, as ordered by Washington, and then I went up to the room to wait.

I wondered how long it would be before Leonard knocked on my door. I was to rendezvous with him; that was all I knew about my assignment.

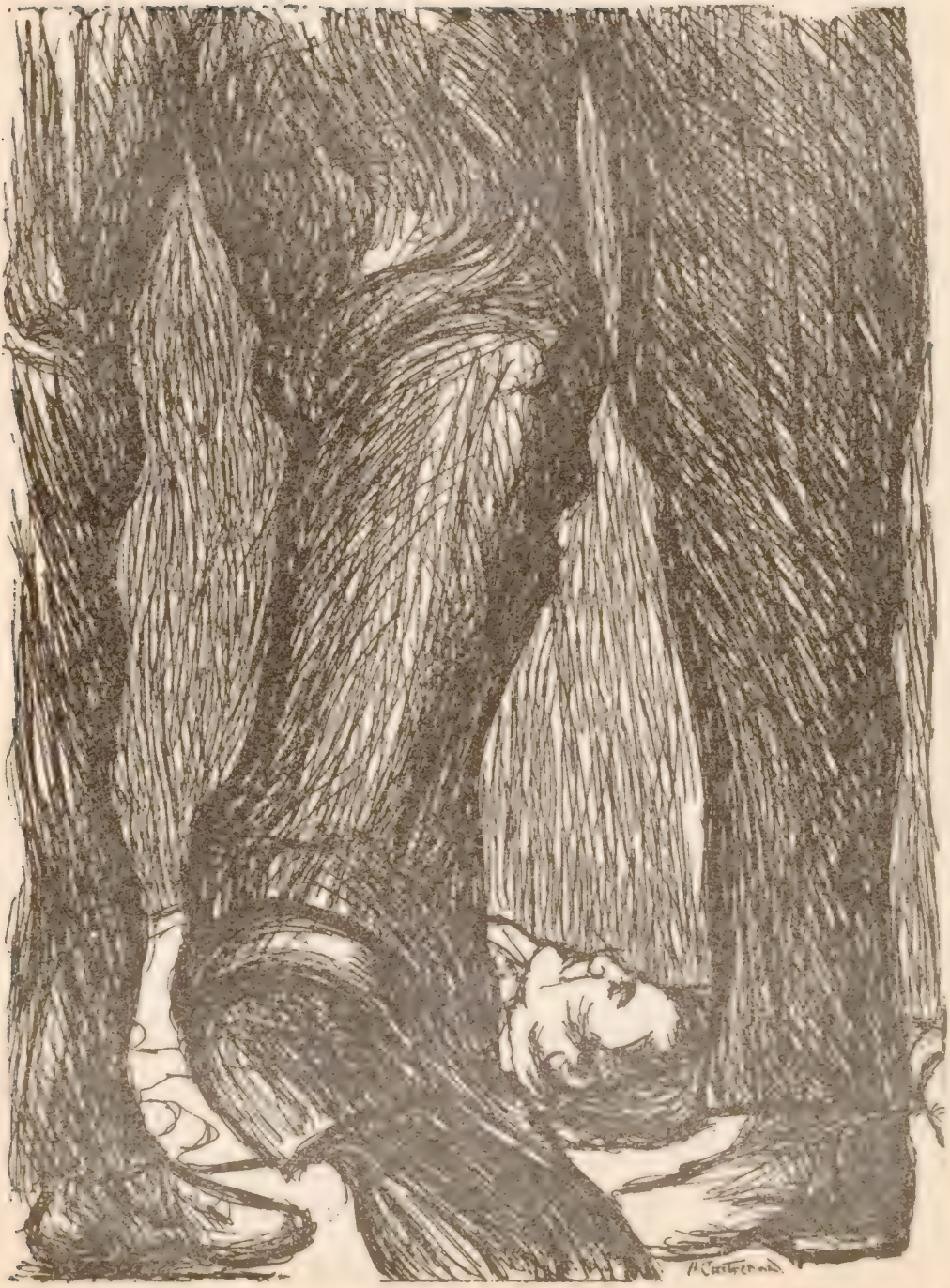
I was looking forward to working with him again. Three years before we had worked as a team in Toronto, where I had found him to be an efficient agent. In addition, I liked him.

He arrived at precisely six-thirty. He didn't look one hour older than when we had scurried through the streets of Toronto. He grinned. Perfect white teeth flashed. But he didn't say a word until he was inside and the door was closed behind him. Then he took my hands and held them far apart while his eyes roamed over me.

"Toni," he said. The roaming eyes sparkled. "Uncle Sam's sauciest secret agent."

He had a little something going for himself, too. Constructed like a Fijian warrior, he was expensively manicured and clad, and there was an athletic manliness about him that made some girls turn handsprings. Not me, of course. I keep my feet on the ground. Always.

But I let him draw me in, any-



way. He kissed the tip of my nose. I laughed softly, put space between us.

"Careful," I said. "You can look, but mustn't touch. Remember, I might explode."

He chuckled at the inside joke, shook his head, and went to a window, where he stood looking out on the fading day for a moment, then turned and put his hips against the sill. He offered me a cigarette. I shook my head. He lit his, blew out smoke, and asked, "Good flight?"

"Yes."

"How's Washington?"

"Fine. Where have you been hiding?"

"Vancouver." He drew on the cigarette. "It's one of the reasons I'm here. Vancouver is close. The other reason is I know you on sight, and I know a man named Fesmire on sight, while neither you nor Fesmire know each other."

"But I've got a hunch we're going to meet," I grinned.

"Yes," Leonard nodded. "Tonight around ten at a club named The Shelf."

"Who is he, Leonard?"

"One of us. I worked with him 'bout a year ago in Honolulu. He knows the ropes."

"Why is he here?"

Leonard shrugged.

"What *do* you know?"

He left the window sill. "Just that I am to make you available to Fesmire—It's the only way he will recognize you—and that I'm jealous."

"You aren't going to be working with us?"

"Nope."

I lifted eyebrows. "Just me'n this Fesmire?"

"I guess."

"You go back to Vancouver tonight?"

"Uh-huh."

I knew disappointment, and I reached for a straw as I turned to the dresser. "We're meeting Fesmire around ten, huh?"

"Yes."

"What do we do in the meantime?"

I watched his reflection in the dresser mirror. He looked briefly puzzled, and then his face crinkled with a wide grin.

"Well, doll, I suppose you powder and perfume," he said, moving in close behind me.

"First, of course, I must bathe."

"Naturally," he said, butting his cigarette, then putting his hands on my hips and his mouth against the back of my neck.

I stood there for a few seconds, shivering reflexively, and then I said softly, "Can you find my zipper?"

His fingers went to the clasp at the top of my spine.

"Old acquaintances should be renewed," I said.

His fingers opened the zipper.

"And I promise not to explode,"

I breathed, turning inside his arms and locking my wrists behind his neck.

"Kiss me."

I did. On the mouth this time. And I let my lips spread . . .

WE DROVE to The Shelf in Leonard's rented car. It was a conventional supper club with atmosphere, featured steaks, recession-priced drinks, a postage stamp-sized dance floor and a five-man combo.

Fesmire sat alone at a table across the tiny dance floor from us. He finished a meal without looking at us. Then he lit a cigar and sat back and looked quite contented with the world while Leonard said, "He'll be giving you the eye in a few minutes, pet. Play along with it."

"Sure," I said.

Leonard ordered drinks. Then Fesmire was looking around the club as if he owned it, and his eyes finally settled on me, hung briefly before he smiled.

"I've been touched," I said in my drink to Leonard.

"And I'll be retiring to the men's room," he said, grinning. "If you don't mind."

"I do, but what the devil can I do about it?"

He excused himself and left the table. I sipped my drink, allowed my eyes to slide back to Fesmire. He was looking at me, smiling.

The smile widened. He put down his cigar, left his table, came to me and stood tall, thirty, tow-headed, loosely constructed and confident.

When he asked me to dance, I turned on the proper amount of hesitation before moving into his arms. We glided smoothly around the floor and had to talk in spasms because of the other dancers.

"First things first, Miss Target," he said calmly without looking down on me. "I have a shadow. The man who followed me here had a drink and left. That means someone else in the club is on me now. I don't know who it is."

"Cozy."

"Very, so I'll brief you quickly. Twenty years ago a German chemist—name not important—left there and took up residence in Moscow. A month later, he dropped out of sight, to remain out of sight for twenty years. He didn't pop onto the scene again until about two months ago. Where he popped is interesting. Peking."

"They tell me the climate there is lousy."

"Depends on from where you are viewing the scenery, I suppose. In the case of our chemist, we're not sure. His change of residence and obscurity could have been voluntary, induced by the Soviets, or he could have been kidnaped by Peking agents. All we're sure of is, he was not idle in these twenty years. He developed a gas."

"Don't all chemists?"

"This one is a dandy. Odorless, tasteless. It can incapacitate one person or thousands simultaneously. You don't know you're breathing the stuff. You lose consciousness for about thirty minutes. Then, when you regain consciousness, you are violently ill and incapable of activity or thought for approximately twenty-four hours."

"It does have potential, doesn't it, Mr. Fesmire?"

"Military installations, cities, vast areas—even the entire coast line of a nation—could be immobilized."

"Handy stuff for invasions, huh?"

"That's one prospect, Miss Target—if there is production."

"There hasn't been?"

"Our information is that the work notes and formula are in writing. No more. And the German is dead."

"Death by natural cause?"

"Who knows? The important thing is we have his notes."

Over Fesmire's shoulder, I watched Leonard return to our table. He looked properly disgruntled for the benefit of anyone who might be interested; then he sat and stared glumly on Mr. Fesmire and me.

"And how," I asked carefully, "did we get his notes?"

I felt my partner shrug. "Either our chemist friend had a change of heart about the people he was working for, or someone else in Peking's ranks saw a chance to make a fortune on the international market, stole the notes, defected, sold—or there is always the possibility that we have a very clever operator in Peking, someone who managed to steal and get out. *How* really isn't important now, Miss Target. We have the notes, they are legitimate, and they must be delivered to Washington."

"By me?"

"By you."

"Somehow I suspicioned. You are about to give them to me?"

"I am not. I am just to be used as a decoy."

"And I'm all ears, friend."

"They traveled by agent from Peking to Hong Kong, by another agent from Hong Kong to Manila, then from Manila to Honolulu."

"And now here to Seattle."

"Yes. And so far our people have managed to stay one jump ahead of the Reds. Our Peking, Hong Kong and Manila carriers are dead, but fortunately they were killed in each case *after* delivery."

"Friendly folk, these Reds."

Fesmire said grimly, "They're killing off our people as if they were flies."

"Our Honolulu carrier?"

"She was still alive the last time I saw her."

"She?"

"All of our carriers have been women. Peking. Hong Kong. All. There's a reason, I'm told. I don't know what that reason is, but—"

"So why are you, a man, the decoy?"

"I suspect availability. My work in Honolulu is known. I'm no longer valuable there. Fact is, I was preparing to leave for another corner of the world when this came up."

"And?"

"Our Manila carrier made her delivery to Suzette, then came to me in an effort to confuse the Reds."

"But no confusion, huh?"

"Some. Not enough. Suzette and I took different flights out of Honolulu, but we each had a shadow. Still, our friends did make one mistake. They put a man on Suzette and when she arrived this afternoon—"

"Ahhh."

"What?"

"You don't have to tell me. A female rest room."

"Handy?"

"Sometimes, quite. So now I find Suzette where?"

"When you leave here, have Leonard drive you back to the hotel. Wait an hour. Don't check out of the hotel when you leave again, but after you contact Suzette go directly to Redwood Airfield. It's a private field. There's a chartered plane there waiting for you."

"Suzette?"

"You identify yourself to her by saying something about Cherokee Indians. Say anything. Just use the name Cherokee. Got it?"

"Where, Mr. Fesmire?" I said, suddenly a bit impatient.

Without looking up at him, I could sense him taking in the club, the other dancers. And then he twirled me through a fast turn in a corner and back out toward the center of the floor.

"She's at—"

It was all he got out. The couple behind him bumped us hard. I reeled backward, taking Fesmire with me. I crashed into another couple and the prop kept me from going down.

Fesmire suddenly was a dead weight. His face was screwed up; his eyes rolled up into his head, and he slid down my front to the dance floor.

Somewhere a man cursed. There was a murmur of hushed voices and then silence. Even the combo had quit playing.

I bent over Fesmire quickly. His lips worked. He breathed, "Chinch—" A lot of air came out of him. I knew he was dead.

I got up, folded back to the

edge of the crowd. I searched for a large man with pasted down black hair, a wide-shouldered man in a light blue suit. He was the man who had crashed into Fesmire. I didn't find him, but I saw Leonard on the back edge of the crowd. I knew what he wanted, and I faded into the crowd as gently as possible.

And then I was with Leonard and we were hustling out of The Shelf. We managed to get into the rented car and drive away without anyone shouting after us.

"OKAY, TONI," Leonard said in a hard voice. "Let's have it."

"Are we being followed?"

He was an expert behind the wheel. He remained within the speed limits, but he made the quick turns, the sudden stops, and the timing of the yellow traffic lights perfect. Finally he said, "Clear."

He passed me a cigarette, poked in the dash lighter. Then he used his own lighter on his cigarette, exhaled noisily and repeated, "Let's have it."

"If Washington wanted you to know, you'd know, right?"

"Damn it—"

"What does chinch mean to you?" I interrupted, using the dash lighter. "It was the last thing Fesmire said. 'Chinch'."

He puzzled over it briefly, his hands gripping the steering wheel hard. "Chinch, bedbug," he said.

"But what could it mean?"

"Who knows?"

"Then I need a public phone."

"What for?"

"Washington."

He found an all night drugstore and braked at the curbing. "Look, Toni," he protested as I vacated the sedan. "I'm a part of this now."

I looked up and down the street. No car had braked behind or opposite us.

"And I know when someone is following me," he said grimly.

I left him and entered the drugstore. While the man behind the glass counter was getting change for me, all I could think about was the string of carriers who had been slain. A decoy could be added to the list now.

Maybe Washington would assign Leonard to the case. I had a feeling I needed him.

I took the change and dialed the special number in Washington, D. C. When I left the phone booth, I had my answer and Leonard. Chinch was the nickname of a trusted man in Seattle, a man named Harold Ylanti who ran a bistro called The Bedbug.

I crossed the sidewalk and stopped suddenly. I bent and looked inside the sedan. Leonard sat there, all right. He sat very erect behind the steering wheel, both hands on the wheel. But he sat too erect. He didn't move. He didn't bend to open the door for me. And I knew:

Someone else was an expert

with an automobile, an expert at tailing.

I also knew Leonard was dead.

I turned and crashed into the massive chest of a huge man. He stepped back. He was olive-skinned, possibly South American, and neatly attired. He brought a fist up fast and hard under the point of my jaw.

I seemed to be in a grave, face down. It was hot. Suffocating. The heat pressed in on me while above me there was the grunt of voices and the dull throb of a motor. I could feel pressure at the base of my spine and on the back of my neck. For an instant, I had the sensation of dirt being shoveled in on me.

I was being buried, and I wasn't even dead!

I struggled, mouthed sounds. The pressure left my back briefly; then something that felt like a giant shoe crashed down against my buttocks and flattened me again.

"Stay down there," a voice graveled.

It came crashing back: the drugstore, Leonard. And I suddenly knew where I was—face down on the back seat floor of a car with a man sitting over me, one foot on my neck and the other planted firmly on my posterior.

The smooth hum of a powerful motor was all around me. I felt flushed, then chilled. My head throbbed. The sweat of fear came out of my pores, and my stomach muscles were bunched into a lump.

Suddenly the car lurched. I pitched forward. The top of my head pressed against a door. We had turned. I heard a crunching noise, the tires eating something rough as though we had turned onto a rock road or drive. The hum of the motor became silent and everything was quiet until the man over me opened the door and another man outside the car fastened hands in my armpits.

He yanked me outside and put me on my feet, allowed me to stagger against the sedan and then to stand alone.

"Take her," the graveled voice inside the car said. The man who had hit me gripped my arm up high, half dragging me between two sedans.

My head pounded and my jawline felt swollen. The inside of my mouth was bleeding. I could taste the blood, and I attempted to shake the cobwebs out of my head as the man took me from rock to smoothness.

My foot jammed against a step and I went down on my knees. I felt a run in my hose streak along my left leg. The man holding me swore. I was going to do more than that when I regained my senses. But at the moment he jerked me up and we went up steps, crossed what I figured was a concrete porch and then went through a door without knocking.

We were suddenly in softness and richness. Although my thoughts were whirling and my eyes wouldn't focus, I could feel the softness underfoot and I could smell the richness.

I also saw two vague shadows in an open doorway to my right my captor propelled me forward. We went down what I knew was a carpeted hallway. Then I was turned. I heard the click of a latch and I had the fuzzy image of a door opening in front of me.

Hands hit my back hard and I reeled forward blindly, stumbled. My knees struck something hard and sharp. I cried out as streaks of pain shot up my legs, then I was pitching forward until my face smashed into carpeting. I flipped. My legs waved against air crazily. They went on over my head and crashed into the floor.

Even fuzzy in the mind, it wasn't difficult to figure. I'd been shoved into a room. I'd spilled over a low table, and now I lay, half conscious, on my back on carpeting while all around me there was sudden stillness.

I slowly pushed up into a sitting position. Somewhere I'd lost my purse. I shook my head, then jackknifed forward and let it hang, allowed the blood to seep back into it and push out the fuzziness. Finally I lifted my head, twisted and looked around. Two men, one lean and wearing a Vandyke, the other wide in a light blue suit and plastered down black hair, were staring at me.

The bearded man shook his head and looked at the man I recognized from The Shelf, the man who had killed Fesmire.

"No," said the bearded man. "This is not the same girl."

"Fesmire danced with her," said the large man defensively. Tote and I saw them. They could have exchanged—"

"It is not Suzette," said the bearded man.

Then they faded back out of the doorway and the door was closed, and I heard a lock click home. I scrambled, anyway. I ran to the door, tried the knob. It did not turn. I looked around the room. It was small, windowless, richly furnished, a library. Books lined the shelves of three walls.

I stared on the fourth wall. It was to my right and I was sure it separated me from the room I had been propelled past when the man had taken me down the hallway. I remembered the two vague shadows in the doorway, and suddenly I gained heart. I had a hunch my kidnapers were now meeting in that room.

Quickly, I unfastened the string of false pearls and took them from my neck. I went to the wall. The string also was an electronic listening device. I put one end against the wall and the other end in my ear. The voices came through the wall clear. They were male voices.

Four of them, and they were talking about me.

"Fesmire could have been on the town. No more," said the voice I recognized as belonging to the bearded man.

"If he was," said the man in the blue suit, "then Tote killed for nothing."

Flinching, I remembered Leonard. My heart pounded hard and I knew a mixture of anger, sense of loss and a vow for vendetta. But I also knew I could not spend valuable time grieving for Leonard.

Death was a part of our game. Death hovered over us like a halo over a saint. In our business, Death was as much a part of our lives as breathing. You lived with it, and you accepted it. You accepted its swiftness, and you accepted its finality. You did not look behind you—or you, too, could die.

"We still have to find Suzette," said the bearded man.

"She could be in Washington by now."

"She could be, but let's hope not."

"Tote," said a strange voice. "there's only one way to be sure about the girl."

I heard the big man say, "Right," and I knew he was coming for me. I could feel his moving out of the room and down the hallway to the door that separated us.

I hooked the string of pearls around my neck and was waiting for him when he unlocked the door and pushed it open. I needed my purse. He faced me with a gun in his hand. I saw the silencer on the muzzle of the gun.

Tote waved the weapon.

I played the role of a frightened idiot. I cowered, I cringed, I murmured unintelligible sounds, then I moved hesitantly toward him and out of the room. He stepped back, pointed the gun toward the back of the house.

He was close behind me when we entered another room at the end of the hallway. A ceiling light flicked on. The room was a gaming room. Pool table. Wall dart board. Heavy, white leather furniture. Tote was close behind me. I could not feel the gun against my spine, but I knew where it was. I could hear his breathing.

He closed the door. I heard the latch click.

He was not an expert in his business. He remained too close to me. I whirled and cried out simultaneously, slashing behind me with my left arm. I felt it slam Tote's gun hand aside as I spun. The gun fired. It was an odd sound, a tiny spat; then I saw the gun hit the floor and slide away from us as I fell back on a deep couch.

Losing my balance, I figured, was fatal. I hadn't anticipated going down. But Tote was every inch as stupid as I hoped him to be. Instead of diving for the gun, he came at me. He loomed, and then he lunged, his huge hands claws in

front of him, his face drawn back from gleaming white teeth.

He was coming at me with his hands, and it was a fatal move for him. I lifted both feet, pressed the outside buckles on the straps of the spiked-heel shoes, and heard the sharp daggers snap out of the spiked heels.

Tote saw them. His eyes widened. He yelled. But it was too late. He had already left his feet.

Both daggers went into his chest. One penetrated his heart.

Freeing myself of Tote, I snapped the daggers back up into the heels and got his gun. I had gained a small amount of revenge for Leonard's death, but there was more ahead.

Cracking the door, I expected to find three men storming down the hallway at me. I stood in surprise. The hallway was empty. I stood rooted then, listening hard. There was no sound in the house.

What did it mean?

I didn't like the silence. Tote and I had been noisy. I widened the door slowly and risked a look behind me. Tote had drawn his final breath. I left the room, the gun ready to blast anything that moved.

Nothing did.

I eased past the door of the room I'd been held in and then reached the doorway of the front room. I stepped into the opening, the gun ready. The room was empty.

I went to the front door, looked outside. There was only one sedan out there now. I bolted, ran to it, saw my purse in the back seat, retrieved it, then looked for keys in the ignition switch. The switch was empty. I returned to Tote, searched him, found the keys in his coat pocket.

Forty-five minutes later, I was back in downtown Seattle and braked in front of another drugstore. I tested my jaw. It was sore but it didn't feel swollen. Inside the drugstore, I found the address I wanted in the Yellow Pages of a phone book, asked the druggist how to find the street and then drove to The Bedbug.

Inside, it was smoky and crowded, and noisy. Chinch couldn't include lighting in his overhead. There wasn't that much. I managed to wedge into the short bar, ordered a beer, then turned to the cages. There were five, painted a brilliant gold. They dangled from long cables that disappeared up into a black ceiling, one in each deeply shadowed corner of the joint and the fifth over the combo that made loud, pagan music from a slightly elevated balcony on the far wall.

Each cage was bathed in the shaft of a blue-tinted spot, and inside each was a leggy girl in brilliant red tights, deep black cape and brilliant red plume waving wildly as the girl went through frantic gyrations. It wasn't danc-

ing, for sure. It was strictly shambles, strictly go-go.

But I also had another thought. Could a girl—heavily painted, with a change of hair style, too—find certain anonymity in public display in a bistro cage?

I chewed on the thought for a while and then I asked the barkeep for Chinch.

He said Chinch was not available.

The music ended suddenly. The cages went up into gaping holes that appeared in the ceiling. There was about five minutes of raucous conversation, of ice tinkling against glass, and then the cages were coming down again and the pagan music once more beat against my eardrums.

I yelled at the barkeep again. "How do I get a job in this joint?"

"What kind of a job?" he yelled back.

I thumbed one of the cages.

He attempted to look over the bar. "You got the legs for it?"

"I've got the legs."

"Then you see Chinch."

"Yeah, man. How?"

He looked undecided for a moment, finally shrugged, and pointed to a door to my right.

"Upstairs," he yelled. "First door. You better have the legs."

If that was a threat, he lost. I went up the steps, found the door, knocked and entered without waiting for an invite. Surprisingly, when I closed the door behind me, the sound from downstairs was gone. I stood silent.

The man behind the desk opposite me was stocky, dapper, looked sixty, and had a full head of gray hair and black eyebrows that had been trimmed expertly.

"Yes?" he said without getting up from the desk.

"Where did the sound go?"

I opened his door. The noise flooded in. I closed the door. Silence.

"I can't stand it. It drives me crazy," said the man. He put a pen inside the ledger on his desk then, closed the book and sat back. "And now?"

"Mr. Ylanti?" I asked politely.

"Yes," he nodded.

"Chinch?"

He frowned slightly. "Only my friends—"

"I'm a friend of a friend."

"Oh?"

"Mr. Fesmire."

"But I don't know any Mr. Fesmire, my dear."

"Cherokee," I tried on him.

It didn't faze him. His frown deepened.

"Okay," I said, "I'm looking for a job. In one of the cages. You do use girls?"

"I use girls," he admitted.

"Lots of girls?"

"Yes," he said slowly.

I went to his desk, cocked a hip on a corner. If he had any doubts about my legs, he didn't then. Even with a long run in my hose. I

could tell that he was appreciative, but he didn't react like he was supposed to when I said, "I'd like to quit playing the game, Mr. Ylanti. I don't have much time. I need Suzette, and I need her fast."

"Suzette?"

He cocked an eyebrow. It was all he said. And I knew why Washington trusted this man. He was cautious. Too damned cautious for my taste at the moment. And I had to have Suzette.

I sighed, took the cigarette case from my purse, removed a cigarette, offered him the case. He started to reach, then hesitated.

"Go on," I said. "Have one. They're Turkish. You haven't smoked anything like them. But give me a light, will you?"

He took a cigarette and produced a lighter, held the flame for me, then lit the cigarette in his lips. I watched him inhale deeply. I didn't inhale. That was the secret. Inhale and you were going to be out of things for about fifteen minutes. Smoke without inhaling and you could continue to navigate.

I watched the tiny flicker of surprise cross his face, and then he was slumped in his chair. I took the cigarette from his fingers, butted it with mine in a tray on his desk, left the butts as mementos and went back outside to the noise.

I went on up to another floor and found myself in open space. It was like a huge attic, except that a guy sat at a large gear and winch out in the middle of the open area. But he didn't bother to look at me. He was busy staring down through a hole in the floor and into the bistro.

I saw a door in a back wall marked *Dressing Room* and went to it. Inside, five perspiring and heavily made-up girls in red tights and black capes sprawled on couches and did little more than glance at me when I entered. A matronly woman with blue-tinted hair worn in a bun bustled to me.

"Yes?" said the woman curiously.

"Mr. Ylanti sent me up," I lied. "He'll be along in a few minutes."

"You're gonna be new here?" the woman asked, looking surprised.

"Maybe."

"Two new ones in one day?" The woman looked over carefully, then shrugged and said, "Well, okay, so Chinch thinks all I gotta do is teach new broads how to get into tights. Have a seat, doll—and don't worry about these cats you see. They ain't dyin'."

Which might have been debatable. But I sat on a couch beside one, anyway. A bottled blonde, who was sprawled deep, her legs stretched out in front of her and spread wide, and who was drawing air as if she had hiked up a mountain.

"Tough racket, eh, kid?" I asked.

"If yuh wanna die perspirin' and not yet twenty-five, you've come to the right place, hon," she wheezed.

"Don'tcha get a break?"

"Sure. Can't yuh see? I'm breakin'. Right in half." She struggled and sat up a bit on the couch. "Naw, I guess that ain't true. The green's good. Damn good. And for good green a girl can do five minutes in a cage and twenty-five minutes out from ten till two in the A.M., huh? It beats hell out of havin' kids, anyway. I mean, who's gonna leap up and get you in a cage?"

"Tarzan?"

"Yeah," she agreed wearily. "We got a few downstairs who think they are Tarzans. They come straight out of the jungle, okay. But there's locks on the cage doors, too."

"You got another new girl today."

"Yeah."

"Suzette."

"Naw. Nita."

"She's here?" I said, looking around the room.

"In a cage."

"You wanna show me?"

"You know Nita?"

"I know Suzette."

The blonde puckered thoughtfully. "You got a yank with this Suzette . . . Nita?"

"I dunno."

"Maybe a little romance mixup?" asked my blonde wisely.

"I'll know when I see."

The blonde became enthusiastic. "Jeez, I ain't seen a good hair-pullin' tussle since my sis caught my other sis—well, the hell with that. Let's you'n me go find Suzette."

We went out to the cables and the blonde pointed down one to the glass top of a cage. From my angle, I couldn't tell much about the girl inside the cage, but she seemed to know what to do with her feet and body.

That's the trouble with being a secret agent these days: a girl has to be so versatile.

"How much longer will she be down there?" I asked the blonde.

She yelled at the guy seated at the gear. He grunted, looked at a wrist watch. "Couple more minutes."

"Your Suzette?" asked the blonde.

"Could be."

"Boy, this is gonna be good!" she said enthusiastically.

"Naw," I said.

She looked disappointed. "Huh? You ain't gonna fight?"

"Naw," I said. "I wanna thank her for takin' a certain guy off my hands. You know?"

"Jeez," the blonde wheezed. She looked at me as if she thought I might have four breasts. "Kooks. Everybody's a kook these days." She shook her head, left me. "I gotta rest it, kid," she said over her shoulder.

I watched *it* wiggle away. For some things, there is no rest.

I looked down the cable again. From my vantage, I also could see an area of the club. And, even through the dimness and cigarette smoke, I recognized the beard and the man in the blue suit.

My thoughts churned. They hadn't been sure about me. They didn't know if I was an agent or just some dame Fesmire happened to dance with at The Shelf. So they had set me up to escape. They'd had Tote take me into the back of the house while they'd gone outside where they'd waited for Tote to allow me to make my break. Then they'd followed me to see if I was harmless or—

Grimly, I wondered how harmless they'd figure I was when they found the dead South American.

I had another thought too. I had to get Suzette out of this joint. The two monkeys weren't going to hang around all night. They had to know I'd had a beer at the bar then gone up to Chinch's office. They'd be going up too. Soon. And when they found the unconscious Chinch, they'd start taking the place apart.

The cages came up through the trap doors. Suzette was heaving all over, dragging for air, but she managed to stare curiously at me as she opened the door in the side of her cage and stepped out.

I grabbed her arm. "Honey—" I started to say.

She wrenched away. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Look, doll," I said, "There's a couple of Cherokees downstairs just itchin' to lift our scalps."

Her eyes changed. The curiosity disappeared. In its place was a hardness. She drew a long breath.

"The dressing room," she said.

We had to stand aside to allow half of the cage girl contingent to troop out. They headed for their cages. My blonde was among them. She stared on me briefly, then went on. *It* looked rested.

Inside the dressing room, Suzette ignored the other girls and went to a wall locker. She drew out a towel and swabbed the paint from her face. It did a lot to change her appearance. She stripped out of the black cape and reached for the bra strap—and that's when the door burst open.

I didn't even have to look. I whirled and crouched. It was the two dudes, all right. The guy in the blue suit held a gun in his right fist. It was equipped with a silencer. But none of the dames in the room wore silencers. Their screams were shrill as they faded back into the deep corners.

The bearded guy eyed Suzette and rasped, "That's her!"

Beside me, Suzette breathed, "He was on my plane."

I gave her a hard shove and heard her crash against the wall locker as I leaped to my right and brought up my purse. I yanked the ornament and the gun popped out of the false bottom of the purse.

I pushed the ornament. The gun fired and the guy in the blue suit went up on his toes, his face caught in a mixture of surprise and pain. He spun off balance and went down. Then his gun fired and I heard Suzette gasp. She spilled into the locker. I fired on the groveling man again. He jerked and was quiet. But I still had the bearded dude, who was digging for a gun now. He didn't have a chance. My shot shattered his knee-cap and he went out like a dead man.

Suzette had been winged. Blood was on a bare shoulder, but she was conscious when I yanked her from the locker.

"My slip!" she wheezed. She pointed frantically to the locker.

I found the half slip, stared on it. There didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary about it.

"Put it on!" Suzette gasped.

This was no time to quibble about wearing someone else's clothing. I reached up under my skirt, yanked down my own half slip, stepped into Suzette's and jerked it up.

"Wear it!" she whispered. "Wear it—" Then suddenly she was unconscious and I was left standing among two shot-up guys and a pack of females who were screaming their fear to the entire world.

I bolted. What I didn't need was cops.

Outside the dressing room I had a problem. A crowd, attracted by the noise, blocked the stairway. They faded back when they saw me, but they could attack at any

second and I didn't want more blood shed. So I yanked up my skirt again and popped one of the tear gas pellets from the garter clasp. Then I ran through the fresh screams and shouts to one of the cables.

The guy over there made a mistake. He reached for me. I chopped him down, kicked out of my shoes, hooked them together by their straps, slid them down an arm, stuck my purse in my mouth, reached out, caught a cable and slid down its length to the glass top of a cage.

The girl inside was my blonde. She looked up at me, wild-eyed, then almost shimmied out of her tights. But the bistro crowd, recovering from their initial surprise, sent up a howl that surprised even me. There was boisterous clapping, shouting, and laughter.

The goons thought I was a part of the show!

One guy knew I wasn't. I saw Chinch burst through the door at the bottom of the stairway. He was bug-eyed and still staggering, but he was enough in focus to recognize me.

There was only one thing to do now. I yanked up my skirt again and triggered the tear gas pellet from the other garter fastener.

At first, the crowd froze. Then somebody got a whiff of the gas and yelled, "Tear gas!"

He could have yelled, "Fire!" He would have gotten the same reaction. The clammering crowd piled up at the street door, shrilling and shrieking and shouting.

I used the bars of the cage and went down by hand. The blonde inside asked dumbly, "Where yuh goin' now, kook?"

I wanted to tell her good-by, but I had a mouthful of purse, so all I did was drop to the floor, yank on my shoes and dive into the crowd.

I finally got outside to the sidewalk, where someone spun me off balance. I staggered away fast, spotted a cab and piled inside.

"You know the Redwood Airfield?" I yelled at the startled driver.

"What the hell is goin' on back there?"

"Redwood?" I bleated.

"Yeah!"

"Go, man!'

We went. Just as the first cop car screamed up outside The Bedbug.

IT WAS ALMOST one o'clock in the afternoon when we glided down to National Airfield in Washington. I was dog tired. All of the tension had gone out of me and the only thing I was thinking about was how I was going to get about fifteen hours of uninterrupted sleep.

The weariness put me offguard. I took the first cab to slide up in front of me.

The driver popped out and held the back door for me and not even the unfamiliar courtesy alerted me.

I tried on a smile for him as he held the door and touched the bill of his cap. The jet of gas shooting from the cap bill hit my face. I gasped. It was a mistake. I felt myself folding into unconsciousness.

When I came awake, it still was daylight, I still was inside the cab, but things were not right. For one thing, the cab was stopped and I could see curious faces looking in the windows. For another, the driver was hovering over me, slapping my cheeks gently—and I smelled like I'd been dunked in booze.

I struggled and my driver said, "There she comes." He turned and announced to the sidewalk crowd, "She's comin' 'round now. I can handle her, okay."

I got a look at the empty fifth bottle on the floor of the cab and I knew my clothing had been soaked with the whisky. The driver allowed me to struggle up into a sitting position. I started to go for him, and then he was whirling in front of me. He wouldn't stay still, nor would my eyes.

I felt his arm around me and I knew he was taking me from the cab, but I couldn't resist. I heard him tell the crowd: "She's gonna be okay just as soon as I get her up to her place. I know her. I've brung her home this way before."

Some jerk in the crowd chirped, "There goes a dame with a problem!"

The crowd laughed; then the driver and I were inside a building. A moment later, he let me sink down to the floor of a self-service elevator. We went up and a guy was waiting for us when the elevator doors opened again.

Things were beginning to shape up fast for me now. I knew where I was, and I had a suspicion about how I'd got there. I had to go clear back to the house in Seattle in my thinking, back to where I'd killed Tote.

I'd heard four voices in that house. I'd seen three men: Tote, the bearded guy and the dude in the blue suit. At The Bedbug, I'd seen and got rid of two. That left one guy unaccounted for, but he had been busy.

I figured he had still been downstairs in the bistro when I'd slid down the cable. I figured he hadn't had a chance to take me in The Bedbug, but he had managed to follow me to Redwood Airfield. I figured he had bribed or used pressure to learn the destination of my chartered flight and arrival time in Washington.

And I figured he had made a phone call and a cab had been dispatched for me.

Now my driver gave me to the man outside the elevator. He passed along my purse, too, and then the man was taking me down a carpeted corridor and into a richly-furnished apartment. He put me on a couch and stood over

me, his face clean-shaven and hard, his eyes brittle.

He was medium-statured and looked like he could have been a school teacher but I had a hunch he was accustomed to slightly more violence than you get in a classroom.

He examined my purse, discovered the operation of the gun from the false bottom, grunted, put the purse aside, then said, "Miss Target, you left Seattle without checking out of the hotel. You left without luggage. It follows that what I want from you, you now have on your person. Do you give it to me or do I take it from you?"

I managed to trigger one of the heel daggers and slash at him, but he was quick. He stepped back, then he caught my ankle, and his face was not a good thing to see as he jerked off my shoe and pitched it across the room. My second shoe followed and I was suddenly on my tail on the carpeting and the man was leaning into me, pressing my shoulder blades back against the divan.

He slapped me hard; then his hands moved over me.

That wasn't very smart of him. When you start to paw a lady, be sure she's agreeable.

I felt his hands slide across my hips, where my girdle would be if I wore one, which I don't. And I felt the needles in the heavy mesh belt I wore spring out and catch his palms, penetrating deep, so that my dress tore a little when he wrenched his hands free at last.

He yelped, jerked back from me, but it already was too late. I saw his face contort as the poison that had been injected into his bloodstream got to him. He inched away from me on his knees, his eyes widened. He held his palms extended in front of him, and then suddenly he gasped and pitched forward. He'd be out for half a day. His face landed in my lap hard.

I rolled him from me.

I didn't take any more chances then. I took a city bus—weathering the stares of other passengers who smelled me, to the complex of buildings I wanted. Inside the pillared structure, I was escorted to the back wall of a small, inconspicuous office, the wall opened, and I stepped into the elevator and rode it down the three flights into the ground.

Two men waited for me in the concrete quarters there. They were as stone-faced as the walls. Hampster Tucker stepped forward.

"Chief," I said.

"You smell like booze."

"Rough go."

"So we've heard from Seattle."

"The cops out there aren't happy, huh?"

"Would you be with so many dead and maimed men on your hands? Suzette is going to make it. We're taking care of her."

"It's been an expensive operation, Ham."

"Yes," he nodded. "They were two good men, our boys. The slip?"

I looked at the other man in the room. I shrugged. What the hell, after what I'd been through I wasn't going to quibble about showing a little leg now.

I reached up under my skirt, yanked down the slip, stepped out of it. Ham gave it to the other man, who disappeared through a door in the left wall.

I told Ham about the cab driver and the guy I'd left in a Washington apartment. He dispatched men to the scene, then the technician was back with the half slip. There was writing and figures on the wet slip now and I knew why we had used women carriers.

"Looks like it's all here, Chief," the technician said.

"Photograph it, then destroy the slip," said Ham Tucker. Then he put an arm across my shoulder and squeezed me. "Sorry about Leonard, Toni."

"We live with it, don't we, Ham?"

"So others don't have to," he said.

It helped. But not quite enough.

In the Next Issue—Another Complete Short Novel

THE BIG FRAME

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by BRETT HALLIDAY

Next month's exciting novel plunges Mike Shayne into a tangled labyrinth of murder and pits him against a shadowy foe as deadly as he is completely elusive. For somewhere, faceless and hidden, a limping killer stalks his human prey in the Miami night. And somewhere, somehow, Mike Shayne must track down the killer —before still another girl dies. Reserve your copy now!

THE GIFT FROM THE SEA

As always, Captain Mario had an eye for danger, a pretty girl. Or occasionally, a trifling thing like murder.

by TIGHE JARRATT

ANGELINA, the figure-8 cigar girl at my hotel, tilted her plunging neckline across the counter and whispered, "Somebody very secret said to tell you he is at Grippo, the tailor on the Via Caesario."

I made a sound like "A-a-a-a-hhh," and retrieved my eyes.

"He is very much man," she confided and smiled archly. She plunged a little further across the counter and practically breathed down my throat with a tone that was a caress, "But you spend more m-o-n-e-y."

I tore myself away from the dangerous view and went to find my friend, Mario Faldetta, the rotund and debonair captain of the Surete Segreto. He was being fitted for three new suits of shimmering French silk that looked peculiarly similar to some contraband he had confiscated two days before.

I recalled that the smuggler had gotten away, which was rather surprising, considering that Mario's boat is the fastest thing on the Liguria.

Mario had explained, "It was

Featuring

CAPTAIN MARIO FALDETTA

very dark and choppy. And he was riding very light, since we had just unloaded the last of his contraband." Then he had looked at me with his bland, moonlike expression and made a gesture. "You Americans are so irrational. If we catch all the smugglers, who will do the smuggling?"

"My dear friend," he greeted me now, "I was just telling Grippo here about another tailor who had innocently, he insisted, bought some contraband material and then made the mistake of trying to charge a policeman for a suit he made of it."

Grippo said sadly, "Only a silly tailor would try to charge a policeman."

"No, that is absurd," Faldetta proclaimed austerely. "Police should pay the same as anyone. Even I, a captain, would not think of accepting these suits as a gift, my friend Grippo. I anticipate paying you at least fifty lira each."

I felt of the silk and recalled paying five hundred lira for similar material. But then, maybe Grippo needed to keep busy.

Once back onto the town's ancient cobbled street, I said with restrained excitement, thinking of the corpse found on the beach, "You must have made progress."

"So you guessed?" he cuckled and pinched my cheek with delight. "We will make an Italiano of you yet."

"You learned her name?"

"But of course, *bambino.* Not only her name, but her address, the hour her husband departs for work and the way she goes to market. Also, she wears no girdle."

I thought that a rather crude reference to a girl who had been badly beaten and then tossed into the sea to drown and I said so.

Faldetta stopped dead to stare at me.

"You morbid Americans. Don't you ever think of anything but murder?" he asked.

"Then who are you talking about?"

"Rosetta, of course. The one who smiled so nicely when I picked up her spilled basket four days ago."

I let out a blast of breath.

"What about the girl on the beach?" I demanded.

For once, Faldetta showed alarm. "You mean my men have not picked up the body?"

"No, no. I mean, what are you doing about finding her killer?"

"You are not speaking very clearly today," the captain said, a little irritably. "Maybe it is the heat. I will take you for a little chilled vino and lemon peel at Luigi's."

"Don't you ever think of working?" I asked with exasperation.

"But *bambino,* this is investigation. It has been rumored that Luigi has been watering his vino. This is a very serious crime in Italy."

So we went to Luigi's, where the terrace just happens to offer an excellent view of the girls returning from the beach. Enjoying the view thoroughly, Faldetta told Luigi, "I cannot discern any water in this vino, but perhaps we had better have another carafe to make sure."

Unexpectedly, Faldetta exploded, "It must have been a monster to have beaten that girl that way."

I grunted, "So you've remembered her at last."

"Believe me, my friend, I have been thinking of nothing else," the captain assured me as he craned his neck to watch two particularly lush young things bounce by. "What kind of a man would beat a girl as homely as she was?" he added.

"Perhaps," I said sarcastically, "that was the reason."

He looked at me with his expressionless, marble eyes. "Now do you know, that had not occurred to me." He beamed. "Yet it is very logical."

"You're not serious!"

"But of course. Why not? How old would you say she had been?"

"Ummm, twenty-three, twenty-four."

He nodded his completely round head. "And of what use is a homely one like that at twenty-four unless she's rich? There is no hope for marriage. Also nobody wants an ugly servant, and she certainly cannot make a living as some do, even among drunken sailors."

"And all this time she is eating the family out of house and home," I mocked him.

"Precisely. Not to mention the jeering of the neighbors."

"So the father murders her in a fit of rage," I intoned.

"No, there you stray from logic. He vents his rages on the mother for bearing such an ugly mongrel. Finally the mother beats her to death for some small stupidity, because she is being blamed and laughed at."

He sat back in his chair, smiling broadly, and patted his cannonball stomach. "Now that we have solved that, I think we are entitled to an extra fine dinner."

I leaned on the table and stared at him. "But you haven't solved the case in the slightest! You don't know who she is or where she came from or have a clue or incriminating fact."

"The last is not true at all," he said with considerable displeasure. "We have the corpse, and that is very incriminating. The other points are minor details."

I gave a disgusted snort and gave up. I deeply admire my friend Mario, but he offends every fibre of American efficiency in me. An American detective, now, would be running himself flatfooted, making inquiries, deductions, laboratory tests, and—well—

But Mario was saying with intense debate, "I am torn in two. Tonight, Tomaso at the Grotto will

cook a special lumacer babbalousa. But this is also the night that Romano has announced fresh veal scallopini."

Faldetta compressed his lips and frowned while weighing this serious problem but decided finally, "We will go to Romano's. His niece has just come from the convent to be his new cashier. From a certain table you can see her very nicely as she sits on a high stool behind the counter."

Pleased with his decision, he decided maybe the second carafe of vino did taste watered, and we would need a third to decide in fairness to Luigi.

It was during the third carafe that a pair of his official footpads came by and one turned in to join us at the table. Mario made no offer of a glass of vino. He does not approve of his detectives indulging while on the job, he often explains.

"We have gained no report on the dead girl," the detective said, "except that she was already dead when cast into the sea. Nowhere on the Ligurian coast was there a report of any wild parties or unusual disturbances last night. Nobody has reported a member of the family missing."

Mario Faldetta beamed a trifle boastfully.

"So, obviously, it was a family matter," he announced. "The time of death has been established?"

The detective nodded. "Approximately ten P.M."

"The tide?"

The detective drilled a finger toward the sea. "Here at Liguria, the tide ebbed at seven forty-eight. The wind held steady all night, out of the northwest, four miles per hour."

Mario frowned and pencilled a rough map of the immediate coast upon the marble table.

"The body could not have been dumped off this area," he said, "or it would have drifted further south. Unless it was simply pushed off the cliffs?"

His underling shook his head. "The bruises were direct, almost certainly a fist, although there was one that may have been something like a skillet. But nothing would indicate broad impact."

"Then the body was taken to sea and dumped," Faldetta said. "It must have been taken far out, several miles, and from north of the cape or it would have beached on the cape. Thus we know a motorboat was utilized."

He broke off to consider the hip movements of a passing pair whose bikinis suggested that Mother Eve's figleaf was overdressing.

"Have you ever stopped to think," he asked me, "of the superior design of the female form? There is enough action in those hips to propel a good sized boat—and not a sound. What a smuggler's boat a young girl would make!"

I bit into a chunk of lemon peel to hide my impatience. I had visions that if any of these passing

chicks should wink, Mario would forget the whole murder case until tomorrow, and I wanted the story.

Faldetta glanced back at his evil looking lawdog. "The body might have been dumped in the area of Allessandro's sea rendezvous. He might know something, but alas, we have an arrest warrant for him. It will be hard to contact him until we pick him up again."

He glanced at me with a faintly mocking smile. "Allessandro is the silk smuggler who escaped two nights ago."

"But he would not be back so soon," I said.

"Why not? We had confiscated all of his contraband. He has to make up for the loss quickly to stay in business. What have we north of the cape, Ricco?" he asked his leg man.

"We have four miles of summer villas, *mi capitano*, then a spit of broken rock that runs into the sea. There is a small fishing village in a beach cove in the rocks. You will recall we piled up on the rocks there once, trying to overhaul a pickup smuggler who had rendezvoused with Allessandro? We suspected it was that drunken giant, Labinni, but never could find the hideout for the boot."

Mario's face broke with abrupt interest. "Ah, that village where we saw the pretty little dark eyed one, Mona—but she was only fourteen." He folded his hands across his stomach and looked dreamily skyward. "Let's see, that was nearly three years ago, yes? She should be hanging like a ripe plum by now, Ricco."

Ricco grinned like a Barbary pirate. "But is was not her family who owned the smuggling boat, *mi capitano*."

"Good!" Faldetta said. "Maybe they will be jealous enough to talk. And if they know nothing—" he spread his hands. "It will be excuse to see what the girl has ripened into anyway. We will drive up there after dinner."

Ricco rejoined his fellow footpad. Faldetta turned to me in thoroughly good humor and said, "You see how simply these matters work out?"

"Would you have bothered investigating the village if the pretty little girl were not there?" I grunted sourly.

"But of course not! What reason would there be?"

I gave up and made a project of the wine. What can you do with a man like Mario?

We had dinner at Romano's, where I forgot my spleen in enjoyment of the veal, which would have melted in a baby's mouth. Also, Romano's niece looked very enticing, sitting atop her stool with her legs crossed and smiling our way occasionally with deviltry exploding after years of convent restraint.

Faldetta took occasion to ask Romano quietly if he knew anything about the casks of Spanish

wine being dropped with marker buoys by some smuggler off San Point lately?

"Alas, he uses the last day of the moon," Mario sighed, "and we are always so busy with more important contraband at that time."

Romano's eyes glinted with predatory thoughts. He said he did not know, but might turn something up, and thanked Mario for his patronage, and took the check.

"And now," said Faldetta with a belch of satisfaction, "we will go see our little plum."

We joined Ricco, who was waiting with the Fiat, and drove north through the pastel dusk that the Liguria breathes like a word of love for a full hour after sundown. The cutoff to the fishing village was a scant cart track twisting menacingly through the rock ridge. It suddenly dumped us, with the jolt of falling, onto the village street, which was simply the high part of the beach.

No lights shown in any of the small stone houses. Although people still sat outside their homes and a group of peasant fishmen argued as they passed a skin of wine at one end of the village, it was nearing time for most of the fisher folk to retire against the early hour they would rise to cast their nets at dawn.

"You see, by ten or eleven o'clock, nobody is awake in a village like this except the evil ones," Mario remarked.

Faldetta disregarded the older folk, who gaped, and scanned the line of fishboats pulled up on the beach. A few young couples strolled down there, or sat against gunwales or on piles of net, courting. Only the movement of their bodies distinguished their silhouettes. But Mario's eyes zeroed immediately on the slim form of a girl who had jumped to the seat of a boat to gaze toward the strangers.

"Ah! A ripe plumb just ready to drop, as I said!" Faldetta grunted with satisfaction, although I could scarcely tell that the object of his attention was a girl, let alone make out her face or expression.

He directed Ricco to pull alongside a building where a gnarled old hag had been mending a net by sheer feel and instinct.

"You—Homely One!" Mario Faldetta called out authoritively. "Is that the pretty girl called Mona down there by the third boat?"

"Do you think I'm a fish that I see in the dark?" the old woman grumbled. "If it is a girl dressed half naked, bellying up against any young bull who comes along, that is Mona."

"You do not sound very charitable, old woman," Mario said. "Did you never have daughters of your own?"

"I had one," the old hag said dourly. "Not out bitching with worthless fishermen like that one, though. My daughter went to Rome and got a decent job."

Faldetta lifted his hat to her. "The more wisdom, mother. What job does your daughter work at?"

The old woman stared at him. Finally she said, "It will be respectable, but she has only left to find it." She glared off at the string of boats and spit. "At least she is not bitching around like that one."

Faldetta nodded and ordered Ricco to drive down onto the beach. A way from the third boat he stopped. Mario called out, "Signorina Mona?"

"Me?"

The girl on the thwarts looked startled, but unconsciously smoothed her skirt over her slim hips and gave her thick, loose hair a toss. She jumped down from the boat, leaving her sulking escort without a word as she ran forward, bare legs and feet twinkling in the last reflected light.

Faldetta removed his hat and got out of the car courteously for this one.

"I must have a word with you, my dear," he said. "I am the *Surete*. Hah, what hair and form." He took her arm and held her to study her. "You are very pretty. We must see you at Liguria."

The intake of the girl's breath told that as her fondest dream.

"I think we could find you work with little trouble. Are all the girls of this village as pretty?"

The girl laughed self consciously and dropped her face. "I would not know if I were pretty or not, *signor,*" she said. "I am the only girl my age. There was another, older, Maria Labinni, who lived at the house where you just stopped, but she was very ugly and her mother sent her off to Rome last night."

"Is night not a strange time to leave a village?"

"They had some argument," the girl said. "Maybe Maria chose the night when the village slept so as not to be shamed in front of all that she was being thrown out."

"But why would her own mother throw her out? Are they so poor she could not feed her longer?"

"Poor!" the girl jeered with envy. "If my father had their money, he would dress me like a queen!"

Ricco and his chief exchanged glances. When fishermen had money, it usually meant smuggling. Maria's father might well be the smuggler they had chased and lost that time. "Why then did her mother cause her to leave? Could it be that she was perhaps in a family way, and her young man ran away?" Mario asked.

The girl burst into a cascade of laughter. "Maria pregnant? *Signor,* there are eleven unmarried men in this village, and the married ones are so sick of their wives that they would stay at sea if their boats were safe. But Maria could lie here on the beach naked all night and she would be completely safe. Even my mother, who is forty-two and worn with work, is prettier."

"And well she must be to have born anything as pretty as you," Faldetta said gallantly, hugging the girl to him and giving her backside a little pinch. "Yes, definitely, we will find you work at Liguria that does not callous those pretty hands."

"Oh, could you? When?" the girl asked breathlessly.

"Well, let us see. Maybe I will know something when I have you in at state expense. Yes, I think we can get you a little dress or two included. I will want you for perhaps a week to give me some information. You will point this out to your father. Run along now and explain it to him."

The girl wriggled against him and kissed his cheek impulsively. Then she stood off to cup her hands and call, "Father! I must speak with you."

Faldetta gave the girl another little pinch, as a powerfully shouldered man detached himself from a group of men to walk toward his daughter.

Faldetta got back in the car and prepared one of his fine contraband cigars. Ricco slid behind the wheel as I got in alongside Mario.

"So," Faldetta said, "I will have a beautiful witness at State expense. Now we need only to find Labinni's smuggling boat."

"What on earth has that got to do with the girl's murder?" I demanded.

"Why, *bambino,* the old Labinni witch used the boat to take Maria's body out to sea and dump it," Faldetta explained condenscendingly. "And somewhere around here we will find the old man dead drunk. You will see."

I stared, appalled. "You mean, this is all there is to the case?"

"Oh, there will be some minor routine of evidence," Mario Faldetta said. "But Labinni himself will supply most of it, when it becomes a matter of losing his fine power boat or pointing the finger at his old crone."

He laughed at my incredulous expression. "Why do you Ameri-

cans always expect a major mystery? It was all quite simple from the outset. A girl nobody would bother to kill is murdered. Therefore, it must have been a family matter. For her body to have floated ashore at Liguria on the tide, she had to be dropped north and outside the point. So, as I saw it, she must have come from the fishing village.

"And in that fishing village resides a very pretty little girl who would make Maria Labinni the worse by contrast, a matter that must have been thrown into the crone Labinni's face every time there was an argument."

"But you said as much this afternoon before you knew anything or had seen anyone!" I said.

"But no," Mario Faldetta chided. "I had seen this pretty Mona who runs like a sea nymph toward the car."

He turned to beam at Mona, who was now alongside the car, and reached out to give her arm a little pinch.

Maybe he missed. She gave a suppressed little scream, but she was laughing.

In the Next Issue—KEVIN KAR'S Newest Caper

TWO FOR ONE

AN EXCITING SPY THRILLER

by MAX VAN DERVEER

I didn't like the case. The man who contacted me was no better than he should be, and the woman—there was danger to her in more ways than one. But in my profession a guy can't be too choosy. So I heard him say, "Here is twenty-five grand, Mr. Kar. You are a paid killer, a good one. Frankly, I want you to kill a man—me."

THE AFFAIR OF THE GANDER'S SAUCE

He had dames on his mind and murder in his soul, and three new graves testified to his prowess. Who was he? Nobody in our town dared to guess—except maybe my nosey wife.

by FLETCHER FLORA

MILLIE MORGAN is red of head and long of leg, and she is inclined to be sassy. Her Gregg may not be everything it ought to be, but you sort of forget all that when she takes dictation with her knees crossed. As her titular boss, I am in a position to know.

On this particular morning, which was a nasty morning in November, she pushed the red head through a crack in my office door and pinned me with a bright blue eye.

"Arthur Hanna wants to see you," she said.

"Me?" I said.

"I think so. Aren't you Gideon Jones, attorney-at-law?"

"That's me," I said. "I am he."

"Then you're the one."

"In that case," I said, "send him in."

The red head vanished, and Arthur Hanna appeared. Which was no improvement. Not that Arthur was a positive eyesore. It's simply a question of whether you prefer men or women, which will normally depend on whether you are a woman or a man.

"Hello, Art," I said. "How are you?"

"As well as could be expected," Art said.

He looked well enough. As a matter of fact, he looked pretty dapper. Spruce, you might say. I am tempted to add that he looked in November like a man who attended

AN UNUSUALLY DRAMATIC SHORT MYSTERY NOVEL

his wife's funeral in September. A man who has had sufficient time, that is, to realize that life is a matter of tit for tat, with every piece of bad luck usually squared by compensations.

"What can I do for you?" I said.

"I've got a little problem," he said. "I thought you might help me with it."

For a fair fee, I thought I might too, and I said so. "What's your problem?" I said.

"I had an accident. Some old bastard ran into me out at Tenth and Osage last night."

"How did it happen?"

"Well, I was driving west on Tenth, and he was coming from the north on Osage, and he smacked into me at the intersection. That's about all there was to it."

"Tough luck, friend. Osage, as I recall, is a through street. The old bastard, whoever he was, had the right-of-way."

"Oh, I know it. I don't need any lawyer to tell me it was probably my fault."

"On the other hand, the city ordinance covering such matters wisely provides that an important factor is who hits who. In brief, right-of-way notwithstanding, one driver can't go around crashing into other drivers without incurring some degree of responsibility."

"Forget it, Gid. I don't want to make a big thing of it. His old heap was hardly damaged, except the bumper and the grill, and I'll take care of my own. Let the insurance company worry about it."

"Gladly. But what's your problem? Are you paying me to help you grieve for Aetna?"

"No. Of course not." He sighed. "There's something else."

"What else?"

"This guy that hit me was about a hundred years old. When he crept out of his car to talk to me, he was already holding his back and moaning in pain. Not a scratch on him, of course. Just a sly old bastard with an eye on an angle. He'll sue, Gid. No doubt about it."

"So what? Your insurance company will either settle or defend. Let them worry about it. You said it yourself."

"It'll be a damn nuisance, that's what it'll be. And I don't feel up to it, Gid, to tell the truth. What with losing Ginger so recently and everything, I simply haven't got the heart for it."

Ginger was his wife. Or had been. Buried, as I said, in September. What can you do with a man who feels too bad about losing his wife to want a hassle with an old bastard with a backache? Whatever you do, you don't make a noise like a lawyer.

"What do you have in mind?" I said.

"I want to settle it myself. Or have you do it for me."

"Aren't you jumping the gun a little? There isn't even any suit yet. Maybe there won't be."

"Yes, there will. I know it. That old guy had dollar marks in his eyes."

"In that case, he'll see a lawyer, and the lawyer will contact you, and you'll refer him to me, and we'll get together and try to settle."

"No offense, Gid, but I know how lawyers are. Once some shyster gets hold of this thing, he'll hold out for a lot more than I can afford to pay."

"How high can you go?"

"Well, the old guy isn't hurt. If you see him right away, you can probably throw a scare into him about the court costs and legal fees he'll have to pay if he loses. That sort of thing. I bet he'll take a couple hundred. I'll go up to five if necessary."

"What's his name?"

"Horace K. Stonebraker. He's in the directory."

"You sure you don't want to let your insurance company handle it?"

"I told you, Gid."

"All right. I'll set up an appointment, and I'll be in touch."

Art shook hands and left, looking pleased at the prospect of probably throwing away up to five hundred bucks. I found Horace K. Stonebraker in the directory and dialed the number. Mrs. Horace K. Stonebraker answered the phone and said that Horace himself was working in the yard. She called him, and I identified myself.

Not knowing what Mrs. Horace had divulged, he assured me that he had been in bed and had dragged himself to the phone at the price of considerable physical pain. I arranged an appointment for ten o'clock the next morning in my office. Horace thought that he could, by stuffing himself with aspirin, survive the trip.

Oh, well. It was Art Hanna's money.

II

IN THE KIOWA Room of the Hotel Carson, they set out a luncheon buffet—help yourself for ninety-seven cents—and so at noon I went over there and helped myself, after first being helped by Chauncy the bartender to a sixty-cent Gimlet, a seductive drink that had once proved nearly fatal to me when taken to excess. Since that unfortunate experience, however, it and I had come to terms. The Gimlet was refreshing, and so was Chauncy. The lunch was satisfactory.

I went back to the office and relieved Millie, who had remained on duty. When she returned, ten minutes late, I called her in to take some dictation, but she had hardly had time to cross her knees before the phone began to ring. She uncrossed and answered and listened for a moment after answering. Lowering the phone, she discreetly covered the mouthpiece.

"It's Harley Cibber," she said. "He wants to see you."

"Tell him to come on up."

"He seems to be in jail."

"What the devil is Harley doing in jail?"

"He didn't say. Usually people go to jail because they've been arrested. Are you interested?"

"Certainly. I'm always interested in people in jail. Tell him I'll be right over."

"He'll be right over," Millie said.

I put on my topcoat and hat and went. It wasn't far to the police station, and I was there in five minutes. Inside, I discovered that I had been the victim of a slight exaggeration. Harley Cibber, although present, was not exactly in jail. He was sitting in a little cubbyhole with Cotton McBride, detective, and Hector Caldwell, county attorney. When I arrived, the room was crowded. Any room is crowded, whatever its dimensions, when Cotton and Hec and I are in it at the same time.

"What's the trouble?" I said.

"These boobs have arrested me, that's the trouble," Harley said.

The boobs were plainly annoyed, and I suspected that the appellation had been used before. Privately, I was in sympathy with it, but I doubted its discretion.

"Before we're finished," Cotton said, "it may surprise you who's the boob."

"Harley," Hec said, "you oughtn't go calling Cotton and me names like that. It doesn't show a proper respect."

I said, "What's Harley arrested for?"

"He isn't arrested at all," Hec said.

"Not yet," Cotton said.

"He's only being detained for questioning," Hec said.

"Questioning about what?" I said.

"Murder," Cotton said, "that's what."

"Whose murder?"

"His wife's murder," Cotton said, "that's whose."

"Is that right, Harley?" I said. "Has Cleo been murdered?"

"Yes," said Harley, "she has."

"That's bad news," I said. "I'm sorry, Harley."

"Well," said Harley, "it's no great loss, when you come right down to it."

"Listen to that," Cotton said. "If that's not a guilty man speaking, I never heard one."

"You wouldn't know a guilty man if he handed you a deathbed confession," Harley said.

"Just the same, Harley," Hec said, "you oughtn't to talk like that. It doesn't sound good."

"I'm just out of patience, that's all," Harley said. "It's naturally upsetting to be accused of murdering my wife, especially when I've resisted the temptation for at least five years."

"You haven't exactly been accused," Hec said.

"Yet," Cotton said.

"Listen," I said. "Why don't you

just let Harley tell me his story?"

"I'm against it," Cotton said. "If I had my way, you wouldn't even be here."

"Oh, let him tell his story, Cotton," Hec said. "It can't do any harm."

"Unless it gets better every time he tells it," Cotton said, "it can't do any good, either."

And so, Hec pro and Cotton con, Harley was permitted to tell his story, and this, in a nutshell, is it. Harley's a salesman for a pharmaceutical company, and this week he was out on the road. Having covered his route a day earlier than anticipated, he had come back home today instead of tomorrow as he had planned.

He'd arrived in town just before noon and had driven directly to his home, which was half of a two-story duplex on West Poplar Street. The drapes were drawn across the picture window at the front, and the front door was locked. It being shy of noon and therefore early times for Cleo to be up and stirring, he had admitted himself with his key into a littered room full of shadows. The litter was hardly cause for alarm, inasmuch as Cleo was allergic to light housekeeping.

He was picking his way across the room in the litter and shadows when he stumbled over something sizeable on the floor. The sizeable something, on investigation, had turned out to be Cleo, and Cleo had turned out to be dead.

"The room," said Harley, "smelled like gin."

"You think there had been a party?" I said.

"No," said Harley. "The mess was just about right for Cleo without any help."

"Then how do you account for the smell of gin?" I said.

"Cleo had been hit over the head with a bottle of it," he said, "and the bottle had broken."

"Oh," I said. "So that accounts for it."

"It may account for the smell, but it doesn't account for a lot else," said Cotton, "and I'm here to tell you it doesn't."

"What else?" I said.

"Lots else," said Cotton.

"Nothing else," said Harley. "Not a damn thing else. The boob just wants to arrest me and put me in jail, that's all."

"That's right," Cotton said. "Can we arrest him, Hec?"

"I don't think we'd better," Hec said. "Not yet, anyhow."

"I don't see why not. How do we know he wasn't back in town a lot earlier than he claims?"

"We don't know that he wasn't, and we don't know that he was. You have to do some more investigating, Cotton."

"Meantime, it seems to me, we could keep Harley in jail. Who had a better reason to kill Cleo than Harley?"

"No one," said Harley. "I admit it."

"Don't admit anything," I said.

"He already has," Cotton said, "and it's good enough for me."

"I hit her over the head with a bottle of gin by remote control," Harley said. "It was magic."

"When, exactly, was she killed?" I said.

"We don't know exactly," Hec said. "Sometime last night. The coroner thinks it was around eleven."

"The coroner is a boob," Harley said. "He wouldn't know what time Cleo died if he'd been holding a stopwatch on her."

"There you go again, Harley," Hec said. "Why do you keep calling every single official a boob?"

"Because all officials are boobs," said Harley. "That's easy."

"Well," I said, "this plainly isn't getting us anywhere. Hec, you'd better charge Harley with something and arrest him or let him go."

"Let's arrest him," Cotton said.

"On what grounds?" I said.

"Suspicion of murder," Cotton said.

"You haven't got any grounds for suspicion," I said.

"That's right, Cotton," Hec said. "When you come right down to it, we haven't. We'll have to let him go."

"It's a mistake," Cotton said.

"Harley," Hec said, "you can go."

We went. Outside, we paused on the sidewalk. In spite of being a smart aleck, Harley looked sort of sad and lost, standing there in the nasty November day, and I felt sorry for him.

"Come on over to the office and fill me in," I said.

"Not now," he said. "I've got something else to do, Gid. I'll see you later.

He went off down the sidewalk, his topcoat tails flapping around his knees.

III

LATER WAS that night. Full of roundelay and potato dumplings, I was in the living room with Sid and Papa Haydn. Sid is my wife, as you may or may not know, and Papa Haydn, as you surely do, was a jolly man with sad spots who wrote symphonies and other things a long time ago. Sid was on the sofa with her nice legs curled under her, and Papa was on the hi-fi.

What with my eyes full of Sid and my ears full of music and my belly full of sirloin, it was a good time with a solid chance of getting

better. For the sake of domestic tranquility, I had not mentioned murder. Sid, having been busy with rolled sirloin and dumplings, had not seen the evening paper, which had.

Then the doorbell rang. I answered it, and there was Harley.

"Hello, Harley," I said. "Come on in."

He came into the little hall, where he shed his hat and coat, and I took him in with Sid and Papa. Papa kept spinning on the hi-fi, but Sid uncurled her legs and stood up.

"Look who's here," I said.

"Hello, Harley," Sid said. "How are you?"

"All right, I guess." Harley sat down and laced his fingers and clamped his hands between his knees. "I've been down to see Cleo."

"Where's Cleo?" Sid said.

"She's down at Charlie Paley's Funeral Parlor."

"She is? What's she doing down there?"

"She isn't doing anything. She's just lying there."

"What Harley means," I said, "is that Cleo's dead. I haven't told Sid about it yet, Harley."

"Oh? Well, that's the way it is, Sid. Cleo's dead, and she's lying down there in Charley Paley's Funeral Parlor."

"Damn it, Gid, why don't you tell me things? Don't you think I want to know what happens? Harley, I'm so sorry."

"That's what I've been trying to be." Harley sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I've been down there trying to be sorry. I thought it might help if I could look at her and remember when she loved me, but it's pretty hard to remember something that was over almost before it started."

"When did Cleo die?"

"Last night sometime. I found her today when I came home."

"Wasn't it rather sudden? I didn't even know she was sick."

"She wasn't. Someone hit her over the head with a bottle of gin."

"You mean she was murdered?"

"That's what he means," I said.

"Whoever could have done it?"

"Well, Cotton McBride says it was Harley, and Harley says it wasn't. As his lawyer, I'm inclined to believe Harley."

"As a sensible person, so am I. Anytime Cotton McBride says something was done by one person, it's bound to have been done by someone else."

"Cotton's a boob," said Harley.

"You've got to quit calling Cotton that," I said. "It creates an unfavorable impression. Harley, if you didn't kill Cleo, do you have any idea who did?"

"That's why I'm here. I never could keep track of Cleo, once she got under way, but I can think of a couple of guys she was messing around with."

Papa Haydn quit spinning his spell of spotted music, jolly with

little stains of sad, and I let him lie mute. Even Papa's sad spots are not appropriate to death, let alone murder.

"What guys?" I said.

"Fergus Noble for one," Harley said, "and Jack Casey for another."

"Fergus Noble!" Sid said. "What in the world did Cleo want to mess around with Fergus Noble for?"

"Who knows?" Harley shrugged. "I guess Cleo liked variety."

"Well, I can understand that. A little variety appeals now and then to any girl, even to me, but in my opinion Fergus Noble is simply too much."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said, a little grimly.

"On the other hand, that Jack Casey is something else. Exciting is what he is."

"What he is," I said, "is a small-time, small-town operator who runs an illegal game room in the back of his bar."

"You think so? I've heard different. I've heard that he has important connections and things. Why doesn't Hec Caldwell raid his place and put him in jail?"

"Because Hec Caldwell's a boob," Harley said.

"Well," Sid said, "I can't argue with that."

"Never mind," I said. "If Fergus Noble and Jack Casey were involved with Cleo, Cotton and Hec will find out about it. Harley, why didn't you tell them this afternoon?"

"Why the hell should I tell Hec and Cotton anything? All they want to do is put me in jail."

"Don't worry. If you were out of town until today, we shouldn't have any trouble proving it."

Harley stood up suddenly and rubbed his hands on his hips as if the palms were damp.

"Anyhow," he said, "I just thought I'd come by and tell you. As my lawyer, Gid, it's your job to follow up things and keep me out of jail if you can."

"I'll do my best," I said.

I took him to the door and let him out and watched him go down the walk to the street. When I went back into the living room, Sid was already reading the story of the murder in the evening paper, and I sat down and began to wonder if there was any way to salvage what was left of an evening that had started out good getting better and had got worse instead. Having finished the story, Sid laid the paper aside and looked at me in a way that made me doubt it.

"Mike Shayne wouldn't," Sid said.

"Mike Shayne wouldn't what?"

"Wouldn't simply sit and do nothing when his client was in danger."

"Harley's not in any danger. All we have to do is establish his alibi."

"I wish I could be so complacent, I really do. Poor Harley is subjected to every kind of humiliation and harassment by Hec Cald-

well and that Cotton McBride, and you are not even concerned."

"Damn it, a murder has to be investigated, after all."

"That pair couldn't investigate a backyard barbecue, as you should know very well."

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

"I don't know what to expect from you, I'm sorry to say, but if it were me I'd investigate things myself."

"Not me. I'm a lawyer, not a detective."

"You could at least talk with Mrs. Zimmer."

"Who's Mrs. Zimmer?"

"There you are, Gid. You don't even know who Mrs. Zimmer is. It says right here in the paper that she's the woman who lives in the other half of the duplex."

"Cotton's already talked with her. You can bet on that."

"Well, that's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. Of course, he's talked with her. It's all the more reason why you should talk to her, too."

"All right I'll see her tomorrow."

"Tomorrow may be too late. It may be too late already. Cotton and Hec may have tied her up as a witness for the prosecution. They're perfectly capable of a dirty trick like that."

"What prosecution? Keep your shoes on. No one's even been indicted yet."

"Gid, must you always argue about every little thing? The simple truth is, you owe it to Harley to see Mrs. Zimmer as soon as possible. What that idiot Cotton learned from her and what I learn from her are certain to be two different things."

"You? Where, if I'm not being nosey, do you come in?"

"I'm going with you, of course," she said.

IV

HARLEY'S half of the duplex was dark, but a light in the front window next door suggested that Mrs. Zimmer was awake and available. She was a tall woman with bleached hair and embalmed flesh and pale blue eyes as bright and sharp as a jay's. They peered at me inquisitively through greasy perimeters of mascara.

"Mrs. Zimmer?" I said.

"Yes."

"My name is Gideon Jones. This is my wife."

The sharp eyes stabbed at Sid. "How are you, honey?" And back at me. "The lawyer?"

"That's right. May we talk to you for a few minutes?"

"About the murder?"

"If you don't mind."

"I've already talked to a little tow-headed cop about it. Persistent little creep. He kept trying to make me remember things I never knew to start with."

"You see, Gid?" Sid said. "What did I tell you? That Cotton McBride's determined to make Harley guilty even if he's innocent. He has absolutely no ethical standards."

"Make *who* guilty?" said Mrs. Z.

"Harley," Sid said. "Mr. Cibber."

"Mr. Cibber wasn't even home," said Mrs. Z. "How the hell could he have killed his wife when he wasn't even home?"

"And yet," Sid said sadly, "poor Harley's about to be charged with it."

"He is? Why?"

"Because Cotton McBride and Hec Caldwell want a patsy, that's why."

"A frame?" Mrs. Z said.

"That's it," Sid said.

"Damn it, Sid, cut it out," I said.

Mrs. Z's jay-like eyes shifted from Sid to me, changing in the shift from warm to cold.

"Say," she said, "whose side are you on?"

"I'm representing Mr. Cibber," I said.

"It doesn't sound like it."

"Nevertheless I am."

"Come on in," she said.

Sid went ahead, and I followed. I had an uneasy feeling that things were getting out of control, but what the hell. So you exaggerate a little. So you commit a bit of strategic slander. If bad comes to worse, you can always hire a good lawyer. Even Clarence Darrow had to do it. So far as I know, even Perry Mason.

"Sit down," Mrs. Z said. "Can I fix you a nice drink of something?"

I needed it but declined, needing unaddled wits more. Sid also declined, not for the same reason. Mrs. Z sat on a big stuffed stool and drew up her knees. She was wearing tight pink pants that made her look as if she were blushing from the waist down.

I had a notion, however, that Mrs. Z rarely blushed in any direction at all. She burned her candle, I suspected, at both ends. If so, there wasn't much left in the middle. Mrs. Z, in brief, was no spring chicken.

In spite of my assurance, it was immediately apparent that she was still in doubt as to which side I was on. Not so with Sid. Sid was accepted as an ally in the cause of justice, which was to keep poor Harley from being framed by the sinister Cotton, and she and Mrs. Z hit it off from the beginning.

My exclusion was pointed and painful.

"Now, honey," said Mrs. Z, "just what would you like to know?"

"I'd like to know," Sid said, "if

Cleo Cibber had any company last night."

"She had company," said Mrs. Z, "but I don't know who."

"Was it a man?"

"I'd assume so, honey. Cleo hardly ever had any other kind. Especially when Mr. Cibber was out on the road."

"Didn't you see him?"

"Not I, honey. I'm a party who strictly minds her own business. Anyhow, there's a side entrance to these apartments. You go up to the kitchen or down to the basement. She could have had the whole Kiwanis Club in without me seeing them."

"How do you know she had company, then?"

"I've got good ears, honey. I don't actually listen, but they just naturally pick up sounds."

I thought it was about time I was making like a lawyer. After all, it's expected of me.

"What time did your good ears just naturally pick up these sounds?" I said.

"From around ten-thirty until after eleven. They were off and on, you know. Not constant, I mean."

"Did they ever get loud?"

"Not excessive. About eleven, as I told that nasty little cop, there was a kind of thump, like someone fell down or dropped something heavy. Something like that."

"That was probably when he hit her with the bottle."

"Who hit her?"

"Whoever was with her. The murderer."

"No, it wasn't. Not unless dead people run vacuum cleaners."

"What?" said Sid.

"Vacuum cleaners, honey. A little while after the thump, I heard Cleo running the vacuum cleaner. I figured they'd spilled something or broken something. Why else would you run a vacuum cleaner after eleven o'clock at night?"

"Another pertinent question," Sid said. "It's positively remarkable how you keep asking them."

She and Mrs. Z exchanged a lingering look of mutual admiration, which prompted me in spite to inject a sour note.

"Listen," I said. "If Cleo could have entertained the whole damn Kiwanis Club without your seeing them, how do you know it wasn't Harley himself over there with her?"

"Because," said Mrs. Z, "they didn't holler."

"Holler?"

"That's what I said. Mr. Cibber and Cleo always hollered at each other. Lots of times they called each other names which I won't repeat."

"I'm not sure that would be accepted under the law as incontrovertible evidence that Harley couldn't have been present."

"I didn't say he couldn't have been. I said he wasn't." Mrs. Z scowled at me and looked at Sid. "I don't want to be insulting or any-

thing, honey, but are you sure your husband can be trusted?"

"He can generally be trusted when sober," Sid said.

With which, rising, Sid said we ought to go, and I agreed. Mrs. Z asked again if we were sure we wouldn't care for a nice drink of something, and Sid said some other time, perhaps. Mrs. Z took us to the door in her blushing pink pants. From the door, we walked down the walk to the street.

"Anyhow," said Sid, "we had a pleasant chat."

"It may have been pleasant to you," I said, "but not to me. I've never met such an offensive woman before."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." Sid took my near hand and patted it. "Personally, I thought she was quite charming."

V

THE NEXT morning, at eleven, I had the rare privilege of meeting Horace K. Stonebraker in the flesh. There wasn't much of it, Horace being on the gaunt side, and what there was had a kind of parched and withered look, as if he had lingered too long on the vine.

Announced by Millie, he limped into my office on a cane and eased himself into a chair with a groan. I have a distinct impression that he rustled when he moved.

"Good morning, Mr. Stonebraker," I said. "How are you?"

"Poorly," he said.

"That's too bad. What seems to be the matter?"

"It's my back. It nags me. I can't sleep of nights."

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"Dr. Simpson. I saw him right away the very next morning."

"The next morning?"

"After the accident."

"I see. What was Dr. Simpson's diagnosis?"

"He said it was hard to tell about a back. He said a lot of serious things could be wrong in there that a doctor might not even know about. I may have to go to the hospital."

"Do you think this is the result of your accident?"

"What else? I never had it before."

"Well, as I told you, I'm representing Mr. Hanna, the other party to the accident. He is aware that you had the right-of-way at the intersection where the accident occurred, but the fact remains that your car hit his. In brief, Mr. Stonebraker, it's possible that you might have avoided the accident by the exercise of normal caution, and it was, if true, your legal responsibility to do so."

Horace's nagging back did not prevent his sitting up like a withered ramrod. He quivered with indignation. I'll *swear* he rustled.

"It's a lie! I couldn't avoid it. There wasn't any way to avoid it."

"That, Mr. Stonebraker, may not

be up to you to decide. If the matter comes to trial, I mean. And there is the other little matter of your injury. It may be rather difficult to establish in view of the facts that there is no visible evidence and even your doctor can't testify under oath to the extent of it. Do you contemplate a suit, Mr. Stonebraker?"

"Well, I've been hurt. I deserve some compensation."

"That's another issue that will be settled in court. If it comes to it, that is. Mr. Hanna hopes that it won't. Although he is fully covered by liability insurance, he wishes, for his own reasons, to avoid the nuisance of a suit at this time. He's prepared to consider a reasonable settlement."

Horace looked wily. He clutched his back and groaned again, suffering severe nags.

"I don't know about that. Seems to me that a big insurance company could pay a lot more than one man."

The iron was hot. Time to strike. I coiled and did.

"Mr. Stonebraker, it is probable, practically certain, that the insurance company would have to pay you nothing. They'd defend the suit and beat you. You'd not only be uncompensated, you'd be stuck with court costs and a lawyer's fee. Is it necessary to remind you that the expense to you would be considerable?"

"You think so? You think I'd get nothing and have to pay a lot of money besides?"

"I'm giving you a professional opinion, Mr. Stonebraker. You will, of course, do as you think best."

Horace was looking worried as well as wily. His tongue was agitated, and his plates clacked.

"Well," he said, "I don't want to be unreasonable."

"Good. Are you prepared to accept Mr. Hanna's offer?"

"That depends on what it is."

"I'm authorized to offer you two hundred dollars."

"That's not very much."

"Let's be honest, Mr. Stonebraker. You aren't *hurt* very much."

"My back nags me."

"Two hundred is the limit. If it's not acceptable, there's no point in my detaining you any longer."

"I'll take it. Give me the money, and I'll go along."

"It isn't quite that simple, Mr. Stonebraker. I'll have to prepare an agreement and a release. To protect my client, you know. Will you be in town this afternoon?"

"I can stick around if I have to."

"Good. Come back here at one, and we'll get the whole matter settled."

Horace left, and I relaxed. I was, in fact, feeling pretty good. What I felt like was a benevolent bully. I was a benevolent bully with an empty stomach. Which they reminded me that they would, over in the Kiowa Room, be set-

ting out the buffet about now. With the buffet in mind, I got up and got my hat and coat and went out into the other office, and there was Sid talking with Millie.

"Hello, Sid," I said. "What brings you downtown?"

"Lunch," she said. "I have an urge to have it with my husband."

"Now is the time," I said. "Millie, my love, prepare an agreement and a release. Mr. Arthur Hanna agrees to pay Mr. Horace K. Stonebraker the sum of two hundred dollars in full and final compensation for injuries sustained in an automobile accident at Tenth and Osage on the night of Tuesday, November 17. You know the form. Call Art and ask him to be here at one o'clock. Tell him to bring his checkbook. Come on, Sid."

"See you later, Millie," Sid said.

We went over to the Kiowa Room and had a couple of Chauncy's good Gimlets. Afterward, I had corned beef and cabbage and Sid had roast beef. The place got crowded with the jolly boys of Rotary and Kiwanis and Lions and other members of the civic set, and Sid, who seemed to be in remarkably good spirits, maintained a running commentary on this person and that, digressing on occasion to include their wives. After a rare interval of silence, during which she chewed beef, she made a particularly arresting comment.

"It's perfectly incredible," she said.

"What?" I said.

"Cleo Cibber messing around with Fergus Noble."

"What's so incredible about it?"

"Please don't be absurd, Gid. It's incredible why *anyone* would want to mess around with Fergus."

"Eudora Noble might not agree with you. After all, as his wife, it's reasonable to assume that she does a certain amount of messing around with him."

"That's different. A wife is expected to tolerate her own husband."

"True, fortunately. But it doesn't explain why she became her husband's wife in the first place."

"That's very mysterious, isn't it? It must have something to do with the mating instinct or something."

"No doubt. It's almost as mysterious as how Fergus got into this conversation. How did he?"

"Because there he is behind you. He's eating a bowl of chicken noodle soup. Turn around and you can see him."

"No, thanks. It's hardly worth the effort."

"That's exactly what I mean. It's hardly worth the effort to look at him or speak to him or even think of him. He's the original little man who wasn't there."

"Then why are we? Speaking of him, that is."

"I told you. Because it's so incredible about him and Cleo. Do you suppose he could have a kind

of fatal attraction for certain women that other women simply don't feel?"

"I doubt it."

"You can't be sure, however. I remember reading about this little man in England. He was sort of nondescript, like Fergus, and he kept marrying all these women and murdering them for their insurance. He drowned them in the bathtub, so I recall. Anyhow, they were in the bathtub when he murdered them, however he did it."

"I don't believe Fergus has ever murdered anyone in a bathtub."

"If he has, I've never heard any rumors of it."

"In fact, Fergus has never murdered anyone anywhere."

"That is merely an assumption. You mustn't be so ready to believe what has never been proved, sugar. As a lawyer, you should know better."

"What?" I stared at Sid with a familiar clammy feeling beginning to stir somewhere in my murky Freudian cellar. "Damn it, Sid, what are you getting at?"

"Never mind." She dabbed at her lips with her napkin and pushed away from the table. "Are you finished? If you are, we'd better go. After all, you left poor Millie with all that work to do, and it's only fair to let her come to lunch as soon as possible in her turn. She's probably famished."

Leaving, we passed the table where Fergus Noble sat eating chicken noodle soup. I found myself inspecting him with more care than I had ever thought he deserved. Limp brown hair, muddy brown eyes, neat little face with a small nose over a neat little mustache and a small tight mouth under it. Faintly pitiable, for some reason, and quite thoroughly innocuous.

I tried to imagine him drowning a naked woman in a bathtub, and I couldn't. I even tried to imagine him bashing a not-naked woman over the head with a bottle of gin, and I couldn't do that, either. As a matter of fact, except that he spooned his soup toward him instead of away, I couldn't see anything sinister about him at all. We went back to the office.

Art Hanna and Horace K. Stonebraker were already there, having arrived early. They were standing in stony silence beside Millie's desk, and Millie, sensing hostility, was sitting in apprehensive silence behind it. Realizing that the situation was delicate, I made haste to alleviate it. Art and Horace signed the necessary documents in the proper places, and Millie and Sid signed as witnesses. Then Art wrote a check for the damages and handed it to Horace.

Horace read it carefully and folded it neatly and put it in his wallet. He put the wallet in a hip pocket, and buttoned the pocket. He said good-by and departed, carrying his cane under his arm.

"I have a feeling," I said to Art, "that you've been had."

"That's all right." Art removed a pair of glasses that he had put on for the signing, tucking them into a leather case and slipping the case into the breast pocket of his coat. "It's worth it to have the old bastard off my mind."

So saying, he also departed. Sid watched him go while Millie pulled a comb through her red hair.

"Poor Art," Sid said.

"At least," I said, "he's two hundred bucks poorer than he was."

"That's not what I meant. I meant the way everything's happening to him, like Ginger dying and having automobile accidents and everything like that."

"Life is real," I said. "Life is earnest."

"Well," she said, "I don't see why it has to be so damn messy. Are you ready to go, Millie?"

"Yes," said Millie, "I am."

"If you don't mind, I'll just go along with you."

"I don't mind at all. In fact, you're welcome."

"Thanks. I'll sit with you at lunch, and then maybe we'll go to a movie or shopping or somewhere."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Millie's supposed to work this afternoon."

"It won't hurt you to give her the afternoon off," Sid said. "In my opinion, it's shameful the way you work her all the time."

"Now that you mention it," said Millie, "I agree. I've been thinking of asking for a raise."

Off they went together, to lunch and a movie or shopping or somewhere, and I sat down and did some work and went nowhere at all until five o'clock.

VI

AT FIVE, I locked the office of W. Gideon Jones, attorney-at-law, and headed home. As everyone knows, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, but as everyone also knows, it is impossible to travel in a straight line when things like buildings and houses and fences and trees are constantly getting in the way. Therefore, I decided that I might as well detour first of all by the Kiowa Room, which is what I did and where I was when Jack Casey came up behind me and sat down on the stool beside me.

"Hello, Gid," he said.

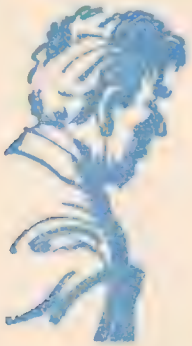
"Hello, Jack," I said. "Scouting the opposition?"

Which was a reference, of course, to the fact that he himself was the owner of a plush place, the Cockatoo Lounge by name, where he could have drunk gratis, or at least at distributors' prices.

He was a slender fellow with black cropped hair and obsidian eyes. You had, when you even exchanged the time of day with him, an uneasy feeling that you were

taking foolish chances. This was unreasonable on the face of it, because he was normally a pleasant guy with nice manners. The occasion was now, however, as it developed, not normal.

"Sometimes I like a change," he said. "It was good luck, seeing you here. I had an idea of dropping into your office tomorrow."



"Good for you, bad for me. If you'd come to the office, I could have charged you."

"I don't think so. I planned to offer advice, not ask for it."

"Oh? I'm not in the market."

"I'll offer it anyhow. It's free." He looked down into his glass, which held Scotch, and turned it slowly in his fingers. "That little wife of yours. A sweet girl. A real little charmer."

"Sid? So she is."

"And that secretary. That redhead. She's something."

"She's going with an engineer at the moment. You'll have to wait your turn."

"It might be worth waiting for. Anyhow, they're a fine pair. It's too bad to exploit them. It could be dangerous. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Gid."

"Exploit? Hell, I have trouble exercising the normal prerogatives of husband and boss."

"It comes down to your notion of normalcy, I guess. In my opinion, it would be normal to hire a detective."

"Why should I hire one?"

"To do your snooping for you."

"Any snooping I need done, I do for myself. It's cheaper."

"Then why did you send your wife and your secretary to my place this afternoon to ask questions?"

"Sid and Millie were at the Cockatoo Lounge this afternoon?"

"They were."

"Asking questions?"

"That's what I said."

"What questions?"

"Nasty ones, I'm afraid. As I see it, they were an invasion of my privacy. And I'm a nut about my privacy. I don't like trespassers."

"Would you care to be a little more specific?"

"Questions about me. About Cleo Cibber. About my activities the night Cleo was murdered. See what I mean, Gid? It's the kind of thing that starts rumors."

"You and Cleo are more than a rumor. In certain quarters, you're a point of discussion."

"Let's confine it to quarters. Just to set the record straight, I haven't seen Cleo recently. I haven't

missed her. Now that she's dead, I still don't. Cleo had a few bad habits."

"Most of us do."

"Granted. But Cleo's were worse than most, and the worst of Cleo's was greed."

This, as you can see, opened up an area of interesting speculation. Had Cleo, perhaps, put the bite on Jack? Well, Jack was a tough customer. Any little bite would probably have been more than Cleo could chew. It was a thought I was tempted to pursue, but I had a strong feeling that it wouldn't be profitable at the moment, or even safe.

"Greed's a bad habit, all right," I said. "It can get you into a lot of trouble."

"So can snooping. I thought I ought to remind you." He slipped off his stool, leaving his glass full of Scotch, and patted me on the shoulder like big brother. "Give my regards to your wife, Gid."

He went away, and I went home. What I intended to give Sid when I got there was not regards. Sid was in the living room, and there was nothing smelling good in the kitchen.

"Hello, sugar," Sid said. "Don't take off your coat."

"Why not?" I said.

"Because I haven't had time to fix dinner, and I thought we'd go out for it."

She had given me an opening, and I took it. My cause being just, I sailed right in, rashly confident that justice would prevail.

"No wonder you haven't had time to fix dinner," I said. "How could you possibly have time for such an insignificant detail when you've been busy running all over town getting your husband into all kinds of trouble?"

"Gid," she said, "what on earth's the matter with you? Why are your eyes popping out like that?"

"Never mind my eyes. What I want to know is why you and that crazy Millie went to the Cockatoo Lounge this afternoon and stirred up a stink by asking a lot of questions about things that were none of your business."

"Oh, that. Do you know about it already? How do you?"

"Because Jack Casey's been on my back about it, that's how."

"Really?" Sid looked pleased. "If you ask me, that's a very good sign."

"It is, is it? Would you mind telling me why?"

"It shows that he's worried, that's why."

"The only result, so far as I can see, has been to get me threatened by Jack Casey."

"That's what I mean. As I said, it shows that he's upset. Why should he be upset if there's nothing to worry about?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's just naturally upsetting to have someone imply that you may have committed murder."

"I didn't imply anything. I was only investigating. In my opinion, if you've been messing around with someone who gets murdered, you should *expect* to be investigated."

I was about to state that there were proper authorities to conduct investigations, but the front doorbell rang at that instant, and I went to answer it instead.

Opening the door, I peered out at the woman standing there in the early November darkness, and I saw after a moment, with a dreadful premonition of more to come, that it was Eudora Noble, wife of Fergus Noble, who had also, according to intelligence reports, been messing around with someone who got murdered.

"Is Sid here?" Eudora said.

"Yes, she is," I said.

"I want to see her," she said.

"Come in," I said.

She did, and I could see that her ample body was aquiver in every one of its surplus pounds. The quiver was not incited by the November chill. Eudora, to put it mildly, was aroused. She was, in fact, plain mad.

"There you are, Sid," she said. "What the hell have you been saying about Fergus?"

"Have I been saying something about Fergus?" Sid said. "Gid, can you remember my saying anything about Fergus?"

"You know damn well you've been saying something," Eudora said, "and I want it stopped."

"Oh, yes," Sid said, "now that you mention it, I believe I said I couldn't understand what any woman could see in him. Something like that. I admit, however, that there's no accounting for taste."

"That's not all you said. You said he'd been having an affair with that Cleo Cibber. You asked Selma Rambeau all about it when you met her downtown this afternoon. There's no use denying it, because Selma called me and told me everything."

"Well, if that isn't just like Selma! You absolutely can't trust her, and that's a fact."

"Why did you ask if Fergus was at home the night Cleo was killed? Are you trying to get poor Fergus into trouble?"

"If Fergus is in trouble, he got there by himself. I'm only curious to know if he did."

"I can tell you here and now that Fergus was at home all that night, because he had the twenty-four hour flu and was in bed. I was right there with him all the time, except when I went to the drug store about ten o'clock for some aspirin."

Sid was looking at her with an odd expression, and I realized with a sinking feeling that another area of speculation had suddenly opened up.

"You went to the drug store?" I said weakly.

"Yes, I did, and I can prove it.

It happens that I met Selma Rambeau there, and she can verify it."

"Well, well. I must say that Selma is convenient, if nothing else. It seems that almost everyone keeps running into her at almost any place you care to mention. How long were you gone to the drug store?"

"About twenty minutes. Not that it's any of your business."

"You may be surprised at what is whose business before this is finished. After all, Cleo Cibber has been murdered, and an investigation is necessary."

"It isn't necessary for you."

"Harley Cibber is under suspicion, and Gid is Harley's lawyer, and Gid's business is mine."

"You just let Fergus alone, that's all. If you don't, I'll beat your ears off."

"As to that," said Sid, "you might find it more difficult than you imagine. You may be as big as a circus horse, but I'm much faster and more muscular, I'm sure."

All this while, having considerable respect for tooth and talon, I remained strictly a spectator. I admit that I was relieved when Eudora, after a final poisonous glare, flounced to the door. With her hand on the knob, she turned to shout the last word.

"You'd better leave Fergus alone. I'm warning you, Sid Jones. If you don't, you'll be sorry."

She slammed the door after her, and Sid sniffed scornfully.

"Eudora's vulgar," she said. "There's no excuse for such behavior."

"In an effort to be fair," I said, "I must say that she had provocation. Wives resent having their husbands suspected of murder. You ought to know."

"I do. And they also resent having them mess around with other women. I know that, too."

"Oh, come off it, Sid. Fergus, of all people! Messing around is one thing, however incredible in his case, but murder is something else. Anyhow, he was home in bed with the twenty-four hour flu."

"Was he? Just because Eudora says it was so doesn't *make* it so. You're far too credulous, sugar."

"She was gone twenty minutes. Damn it, are you contending that Fergus could have gotten up, dressed, gone to kill Cleo, and been back in bed in twenty minutes?"

"Certainly not. Don't be absurd. I simply contend that Eudora was gone for much longer than she claims, and I have a good reason for thinking so."

"What reason?"

"She met Selma Rambeau at the drug store. You heard her say so. Any time those two magpies get together, you can bet it's for a lot longer than twenty minutes. Treacherous as Selma is, I must remember to check the time element with her."

"No, you won't. You won't check anything with anybody. Butt

out, Sid! I simply won't have you stirring things up any more."

"Sugar, I'm not sure that I could drop the investigation now, even if I wanted to. I have a kind of reputation to maintain. Besides, I keep getting interesting ideas. It occurs to me, for instance, even if Fergus was home in bed, that Eudora, by her own admission, was out running around unaccounted for. Jealous wives, in my judgment, should not be neglected."

"Oh, God! she went to the drug store. She met Selma Rambeau there."

"That remains to be seen. In the meanwhile, let's go out to dinner. I've had a busy day, sugar, and I'm simply ravenous."

VII

WE GOT back home about eight-thirty, and there at the curb in front of the house, was a car that I recognized. I also recognized the figure that crawled out of it. It was no one but Cotton McBride, and I had been uneasily anticipating him. Sid and I put our car in the attached garage, and when we came out and crossed over to the front door, Cotton had come up the walk from the street and was waiting for us.

"Hello, Cotton," I said. "What's on your mind?"

"There's plenty on it," Cotton said, "and you'd damn well better believe it."

"As for me," said Sid, "I don't. In my opinion, it's impossible."

"Be careful what you say," Cotton said. "You may already be in more trouble than you can handle."

"Is that so?" Sid said. "What kind of trouble?"

"Police kind, that's the kind."

"Are you sure?" Sid said. "So far as I can remember, I haven't broken a single law in a long time."

"You've been interfering with official police business. I've had two complaints."

"Really? I suppose one of them came from Eudora Noble?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"It isn't necessary. Eudora's just the type who would run blabbing to the police. If you ask me, it was very foolish of her. If *my* husband were a logical murder suspect, the police are the last I'd want to know about it."

"Who says Fergus Noble is a logical murder suspect?"

"I say it."

"There you are. You can't go around accusing people of something like that."

"Why not? I merely accused him of being logical. What's illegal about that? Besides, you're a great one to talk, Cotton McBride. Haven't you practically accused poor Harley Cibber of the same thing?"

"That's different. I'm a detective, and I've got the right."

"You may have the right, but you lack the brains."

"Be careful. Be careful what you say."

"What we had better do," I said, "is go inside where it's warm."

"I don't want to go inside," said Cotton. "I'm just telling your wife to stop interfering with police business, and by God, she'd better do it!"

"How have I interfered?" Sid said. "I've allowed you perfect freedom to do whatever you wished. I'm merely conducting my own investigation independently."

"What the hell makes you think an independent investigation is needed or wanted? I'm capable of any investigation required."

"Oh, that's simply too absurd to argue about. What sensible thing have you done? I'll bet you haven't even checked the vacuum cleaner."

A stunned silence followed this apparent vagrancy. Then there was a series of little gasping sounds, and I knew that Cotton was fighting for his breath. His voice was measured and dreadful, anticipating disaster.

"What vacuum cleaner?" he said.

"You see?" Sid said. "I found out about the vacuum cleaner first thing, and you still haven't found out about it at all."

"What vacuum cleaner?" Cotton said.

"Why, the vacuum cleaner that Mrs. Zimmer heard running in the night, of course. If I were a detective, however incompetent, I would at least be curious if a vacuum cleaner were heard running in the night in a room where someone was murdered. Why was it running?"

"Maybe Cleo Cibber spilled something on the floor and wanted to clean it up."

"Don't be silly. I've been in Cleo's place a couple of times myself, and I can tell you that she seldom wanted to clean anything up, let alone in the middle of the night."

"On the other hand, maybe Mrs. Zimmer just heard a humming in her head. That woman's a nut."

I was inclined to agree with Cotton, a rare occurrence, but Sid was scornful.

"That's the most evasive and idiotic statement I've ever heard in my life. You are simply impossible, that's all there is to it. If you're capable of taking any constructive action whatever, we will see at once if it means anything or not. I double dare you to take me out there to check it this instant."

"By God," said Cotton, "I never take a double dare. Come on."

So we went, in Cotton's car, out to the duplex where Cleo lived before being hit over the head with a gin bottle. Mrs. Zimmer's half was dark, indicating that Mrs. Z was either in bed or away.

The other half was also dark,

Harley having a natural reluctance, which was encouraged by the police, to resume residence in a place of unpleasant associations. Cotton used an appropriated key in the front door, and we went into the living room and turned on a light. In the litter of the floor, there was a sizeable impeccable island, and Sid pointed it out triumphantly.

"What did I tell you?" she said. "Mrs. Zimmer was absolutely right. Someone has obviously run a vacuum cleaner in this area. I don't see how you could possibly have missed it, Cotton."

"Let's find the damn vacuum cleaner and be done with it," Cotton said sourly.

We found it in the closet under the stairs leading to the second floor. Sid got an old newspaper and spread it out on the floor, and Cotton, taking constructive action at last, removed the bag and turned it upside down over the paper. A negligible amount of dust floated out. Nothing more.

"Just as I suspected," Cotton said to Sid. "There's nothing in the bag, and I'll bet ten to one that Mrs. Zimmer didn't hear a damn thing but her own head humming."

For a moment I felt a certain sympathy for Sid in her crushing defeat, but then I looked at her face and I could see that sympathy was out of order. Her eyes were bright with excitement.

"Are you actually serious?" she

said. "Surely you can see that the bag's being empty is the most significant thing of all. Must I do everything myself if anything is to be done at all?"

She turned and darted across the living room into the kitchen. Cotton went after her, and I went after Cotton. When we arrived, she had already turned on the light and was pawing through a large yellow waste basket near the back door. Out of it she fished something wrapped in a newspaper.

"Here it is," she said, "as I was sure it would be."

She spread the newspaper, exposing a mound of dust, and she remained squatting beside it in a posture that was both thoughtful and provocative. Cotton squatted beside her and began to dip into the dust with his fingers.

"So the damn cleaner was emptied," he said. "What the hell's so significant about a pile of dust?"

"It's not the dust," Sid said. "It's what's in it."

"I can't find anything in it that amounts to anything."

"Of course you can't. It has surely been removed."

"What's been removed?"

"A clue of some kind, that's cer-

tain. Even if I knew, I'm not sure that I'd tell you."

"By God, if you know anything, you'd better tell me right now if you know what's good for you. Withholding evidence is a serious offense."

"Oh, nonsense. As I recall, you were just telling me a little while ago to mind my own business, and threatening me with all sorts of unpleasant consequences if I didn't."

"She's insufferable," Cotton said to me and heaven. "I hate to say it, Gid, but you have an absolutely insufferable wife."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "Sometimes she's extremely sufferable."

"Thank you, sugar," Sid said. "Now that I'm finished here, I'm inclined to hurry home and prove it."

Cotton turned out the lights and locked the door and drove us home. He was sulky and silent all the way. Sid and I, reconciled, held hands.

VIII

MID-MORNING of the following Tuesday, I received another call from Harley Cibber. From the same place as before—the police station, that is. Harley, poor soul, was again in the clutches of the boobs.

I hurried over there and found him hunched in a chair with his lips tightly buttoned and his face expressing mutely an odd mixture of aggressive belligerence and stubborn withdrawal. Only he and Hec and Cotton were in the room, but he somehow gave the impression of being surrounded by a mob.

This effect was achieved by Hec and Cotton, the mob, who were standing over him in a way that suggested imminent attack. Hec had on his look of noble resolve, the dedicated public servant committed to his plain duty, however onerous. Cotton, red in the face, just looked mad.

"Now what?" I said.

"These boobs think I'm going to blab about my personal affairs," Harley said, "and they've got another think coming."

"If he doesn't talk, he's going right to jail," Cotton said, "and I am here, by God, to see that he goes."

"Talk about what?" I said.

"About what he was doing in town the night his wife was murdered, that's what."

"Is that right, Harley?" I said. "Were you in town the night Cleo was killed?"

"I won't say I was," said Harley, "and I won't say I wasn't."

"If you ask me," Cotton said, "he's completely guilty. He told us a damn lie, that's all, and we've caught him in it."

"This makes things look bad, Harley," I said. "If you were in town, you should have told me about it."

"Who says I was in town?" Harley said. "All I want to know is, who says it?"

"I say it," said Cotton, "and that's enough."

"It may be enough for you," Harley said grimly, "but it's not for me."

"It won't be enough for a jury, either," I said. "Cotton, did you see Harley in town with your own eyes?"

"No, I didn't," Cotton said, "but others did. I've got three witnesses who saw him in town that night at different times and different places. He didn't register at the hotel or any motel, so he must have gone home."

"Cotton's telling you the truth, Gid," Hec said. "He's got the witnesses, all right."

"Harley," I said, "are you sure you don't want to talk?"

"To hell with it," Harley said.

"You'd better consider it. If you're innocent, it won't hurt. Just because you were in town doesn't mean you killed Cleo, whatever witnesses Cotton's found."

"Cotton's a boob," Harley said. "To hell with him."

"Hec," I said, "I'd like to talk with my client alone."

"You can talk with him alone after he's in jail," Cotton said.

"I'm sorry, Gid," Hec said, "but I've already requested a warrant for Harley's arrest. Cotton is waiting to take him right over to the county jail."

"Take me over," Harley said, "and be damned to you."

And there it was. Harley was determined to go, and Cotton was determined to take him, and there was nothing I could do to prevent it.

"Don't talk until after I see you alone, Harley," I said.

"Don't worry," Harley said. "I won't. Not even then."

"It isn't so bad over there. You may even like it for a little while."

"Well," he said sadly, "let's hope that a little while is as long as it lasts."

But things looked bad, I thought, whatever we hoped. The worst part was, I wasn't sure now myself that Harley wasn't guilty. It's true enough that Cleo needed killing, but that's no excuse under the law, and I couldn't understand why Harley had lied about being out of town. I thought about it while walking back to the office, where I found Sid talking to Millie.

"What kind of conspiracy are you two cooking up now?" I said. "The last time you got together, I almost got lynched."

"That's not the most serious part," Millie said. "The most serious part is, I almost got fired."

"Is that true?" said Sid. "Gid, did you almost fire Millie?"

"I was tempted," I said.

"Well, it's a good thing you didn't, that's all I can say. I've got a good notion not even to tell you what I've just learned."

"And I've got a good notion that I'd be better off if you didn't."

"Do you think I ought to tell him, Millie?"

"Oh, go on and tell him," Millie said. "You might as well get it over with."

"What I've learned," said Sid, "is that I was right, as usual. I went to the drug store where Eudora Noble said she bought the aspirin for Fergus, and it's true that she was there and met Selma Rambeau, but it's not true that she was only there for twenty minutes. The young man at the fountain told me. Eudora and Selma had a hot fudge sundae, and they sat there talking for a whole hour."

"Imagine eating a hot fudge sundae in the middle of the night," Millie said. "No wonder Eudora Noble's as fat as a pig."

"Anyhow," I said, "it seems to give Eudora a pretty solid alibi. As I recall, she was formerly a prime suspect."

"It may give Eudora an alibi," said Sid, "but it deprives Fergus of one. Twenty minutes was hardly long enough to go and murder Cleo and get home again, but it could have been managed easily in an hour."

"Interesting," I said, "but too late. Harley's already been arrested for the murder of Cleo."

"What? Who says so?"

"Cotton McBride says so. Hec Caldwell says so."

"Cotton and Hec are idiots. Damn it, he wasn't even in town when Cleo was murdered."

"That's the point. Apparently he was. At least, Cotton's dug up some witnesses who claim to have seen him."

"Why the hell should he tell such a whopping lie?"

"An interesting question. Could it be because he's guilty?"

Sid was silent for quite a while, her brow furrowed and her incisors gnawing at a knuckle. She was obviously thinking furiously, and I, being aware of the probable consequences of such exercises, watched her uneasily.

"Let us assume," she said finally, "that Harley is innocent. Why, then, does he refuse to explain why he was actually in town when he said he wasn't? The reason, it seems to me, is clearly to be seen. It not only explains why Harley is being mulish, but also why he always seemed to be a lot more tolerant of Cleo's monkey business than was natural in a husband. What's sauce for the goose, as the old saying goes, is sauce for the gander."

"Are you suggesting," I said, "that Harley had a girl friend in town, and that he was with her the night Cleo was killed, and that he is now, for that reason, afflicted with idiot gallantry?"

"Oh, I have no doubt he'll blab eventually. Men simply can't be depended on in these matters. In the meanwhile, however, he'll get

things all complicated, and possibly delay or prevent a solution of the case. What must now be done is plain?"

"What?" I said.

"As the French have it," she said, *"cherchez la femme."*

IX

I WENT, next morning, over to the county jail. Old Murchison, the jailer, brought Harley down from his cell upstairs. It so happened that Murchison's first name was Harley too, and it was apparent that he considered this a remarkable coincidence. He had already decided that Harley was a victim of circumstances and outright persecution. He called Harley *Junior.*

"How's everything going?" I said to Harley, Junior, after Harley, Senior, had left us alone.

"Things are not going," he said. "They're gone. They're gone all to hell."

"Don't be discouraged," I said.

"That's easy enough for you to say," he said. "You're not in jail."

"As to that," I said, "it can easily be changed. I'm prepared to have you out of here before the day's over. All you have to do is tell me the woman's name."

I could see immediately from the foolish expression that came over his face that Sid had been exactly right, but I was not deluded by the revelation into excessive optimism. It was, after all, a foolish expression on the face of a mule.

"What woman?" he said, trying to look innocent.

"The woman you were with when Cleo was killed."

"All right, Gid. You win. She was the Queen of Sheba."

"Cut it out, Harley. Are you going to tell me her name or not?"

"I'm not," said Harley, "and you can't make me."

And he didn't, and I couldn't. After trying for a while, I went away. About the only thing to do under the circumstances was to tell Harley to get himself another lawyer, but I thought, before doing that, that I'd try to find the woman without Harley's help. He hadn't admitted that there was one, but neither had he denied it, and that foolish expression on his face sure as hell hadn't been the expression of innocence.

So I shot the rest of the day trying to get a lead on the seamy side of Harley's life, but the result was, as the expression is, zilch. Nothing. No luck.

After the wasted day, I went home and found Sid in the living room with Rose Pogue. Rose, who teaches second grade, supplies the intellectual calories in Sid's social diet. She's a tall, limber gal with assets that couldn't be properly appreciated by second graders. What I mean is, it's quite apparent that she's a woman.

"Hello, Rose," I said. "What are

you doing these days besides building character?"

"At the moment," she said, "I'm drinking a can of beer."

Which she was. So was Sid. Not to be slighted, I went out to the refrigerator and got a can for myself.

"Do you know what Rose is?" said Sid when I returned.

"I give up," I said. "What is she?"

"She's a loose woman. Isn't that exciting?"

"Not to me, unfortunately. But I'll bet it is to whoever she's loose with.

"That's the exciting part. Guess who she's loose with."

"The lecherous superintendent of schools?"

"Don't be absurd. The superintendent is sixty years old and has arthritis."

"I give up again. Who?"

"Harley Cibber, that's who."

"I knew it was coming. I had, somehow, a dreadful premonition. I took a long drink of cold beer and sat down.

"Let me guess some more. Harley's in jail because he won't say who he was with the night Cleo was hit over the head with a gin bottle, and who he was with is Rose. Am I right?"

"Sugar, you're really quite clever when you try hard enough. You are right exactly."

"And Rose, learning that Harley's in jail, ran right over here, instead of to the police, and told you all about it."

"Nothing of the sort. It was not so simple by any means."

"How, then, did you find out? Intuition? Communication with spooks?"

"Not at all. It was perfectly reasonable. I asked Chauncy."

"Chauncy the bartender?"

"Certainly. He's the only Chauncy I know."

"He is, I dare say, one of the few Chauncys on earth. And this rare Chauncy, being privy to poor Harley's sordid secret, immediately spilled everything?"

"No such thing. Why do you keep insisting that it was simpler by far than it actually was? Chauncy, as you know, never betrays the confidence of his patrons. As a matter of fact, he didn't know about Harley and Rose at all."

"How the hell did he tell you something he didn't know?"

"Well, once he was convinced that it was for Harley's own good, he began to remember things, and he happened to remember that Harley, about three months ago when slightly loaded at the bar, began to whistle *Sweet Rosie O'Grady* softly to himself. He's been whistling it off and on to himself ever since, whenever he's there, and a couple of times he has even recited *My Luv Is Like a Red, Red Rose*. After I learned all this, considering how mulish Harley has been about talking, it was a simple

matter of deduction. There was nothing to it."

"Wasn't there?"

"As you see, there wasn't. When Chauncy told me what he did, I realized that the woman might be in an especially delicate position that needed protecting for another reason. Can you imagine what the school board would say if it came out that Rose had been going with Harley?"

"They'd frown on it, I'm sure. They'd probably be even more intolerant of her sleeping with him."

"That's what Rose and I have decided. School boards have no respect for private lives."

"However you put it, Rose, as a second grade teacher, must be protected."

"True. That's why I asked Rose to come over. We must decide what is best to do."

"It won't hurt Harley to be in jail a little while," Rose said. "Anyhow I intended to explain everything if Harley wasn't released without it. I wouldn't let him be hanged or anything."

"Harley will be happy to hear it," I said.

"It looks like there's no way out of it, Rose," Sid said. "You'll simply have to tell."

"Let me finish my beer first," Rose said.

"What we'll do," I said, "is make a discreet call on Hec Caldwell at his home. Present opinion to the contrary notwithstanding, Hec isn't exactly an ogre. He doesn't want to ruin anyone if he can help it, or even get anyone fired by the school board, and I'm sure he'll try to keep Rose's private life private."

"I'm not all that sure myself," Sid said, "but we'll have to risk it."

"It doesn't really matter much, anyhow," Rose said. "Now that

Harley's free, we'll probably get married soon, and I won't have to teach second grade any longer."

"Harley isn't free yet, Rose," Sid said.

"I didn't mean free from jail," Rose said. "I meant free from Cleo."

"Regarding that," I said, "I'd be a little cautious about where I said it. You mustn't give old Harley a motive while trying to give him an alibi."

X

AS IT developed, Hec agreed tentatively to the release of Harley, although he was less than convinced by Rose's startling revela-

tion. There was a chance, in brief, that she was telling a flagrant lie.

The decisive factor, I think, was Rose's rarified position in the community. Hec had no apparent difficulty in accepting the proposition that even a second grade teacher may frolic on occasion in the hay, given sufficient incentive, but he couldn't quite believe that she would voluntarily encourage the violent elimination of wives, especially if she had plans of becoming one. At any rate, he agreed to treat Rose's little misstep confidentially pending further developments.

So Harley got out of jail, and things got quiet.

Two weeks passed, taking Thanksgiving with them, and it began to look as if Harley was not only out of jail but safely out of the woods. Apparently I had lost a client, and I don't mind saying that I considered it no great loss.

I saw Cotton McBride on the streets now and then. I passed the time of day a couple of times with Hec Caldwell in the Kiowa Room. I heard from Sid, who had heard from Rose, that true love, although suspended by circumstances for a proper interval, was the private discovery of pedagog and drummer. Even Sid herself, strangely enough, seemed to retain no more than an academic interest in the unfortunate fate of Cleo Cibber.

As for me, being all for the quiet life, I was vastly relieved.

I should have known better. If things were quiet, it was only the hush before the storm. As you shall see.

The day it all started again, I returned to my office a little after one o'clock to discover Art Hanna with his stern hooked on a corner of Millie's desk. When I came in, he unhooked himself and stood up, looking as guilty as if I had surprised him flagrant delicto instead of merely wasting office time.

Millie, who has few scruples against the waste of time, in the office or out of it, was casually belligerent.

"You're late," she said, "as usual."

This being an exaggeration with an uncomfortable basis in fact, I preferred to ignore it. Instead of risking an answer, I gave my attention to Art.

"How are things?" I said. "You got another problem?"

"No," he said. "I just stopped in to have a little chat with Millie."

"Feel free." I turned to Millie, who was fixing her face, which didn't need it. "Any calls while I was out?"

"Jack Casey called. He wants to see you."

"Did he leave a number?"

She pushed a memo pad toward me across her desk. "He sounded urgent. Mad, sort of. Have you done anything to annoy him recently? Maybe he wants to poke you in the eye."

"At my convenience? One rarely makes an appointment for such things."

I went into my office and dialed the number, and a man answered who told me to hold the line, which I did for almost a full minute, and then Jack Casey came on and said, "Is that you, Gid?"

"Yes," I said. "Millie told me you wanted me to call."

"That's right. I'd like to come over."

"How about tomorrow morning? I'm tied up this afternoon."

"Couldn't you find a few minutes? I'm at the Lounge now. I could be there in half an hour."

"Sorry. Maybe you could give me a quick idea of what you want."

"I want you to get that damn Cotton McBride off my back, that's what I want."

"Is Cotton giving you trouble?"

"The truth is, he's got it into his head that I killed Cleo Cibber."

"Did you?"

"I did not. The hell of it is, I can't really prove I didn't."

"What makes him think you did?"

"Listen, Gid. I drove out to Cleo's that night. I was sore, and I admit it. I'll even admit that I intended to bat her around a little. She was a leech, that one was, and she was making impossible demands. But never mind that. The point is, I parked across the street from her place in the shadows, but by that time I had cooled off, and I thought to hell with it. I sat there thinking for about twenty minutes or so, and then I decided to come on back downtown. That's the truth, Gid. I didn't even get out of the car. I didn't go into the house at all."

"What's your trouble, then?"

"Someone saw me there and squealed to Cotton. Cotton won't tell me who it was that saw me."

"Cotton's like that."

"What that little son doesn't know is that I'd make a pretty good witness myself."

"Oh? Witness to what?"

"As I said, Gid, I didn't go into the house, but I saw who did."

"What?"

"That's right. Slipped in the side door. Must have parked in the alley or on the other side of the block. About ten-thirty, it was. Maybe a little later. That was what finally made me decide not to go in myself. Three's a crowd, you know. So I just drove away."

"Haven't you told Cotton this?"

"To hell with Cotton. I won't squeal unless I have to do it to save myself."

"Not even on a killer?"

"Nuts. Whoever killed Cleo Cibber deserves a great fat reward. Someone was bound to do it sooner or later."

"Your attitude, friend, is not precisely that of a good citizen. I have a feeling that I shouldn't aid and abet you, as the phrase goes."

"Would a very fat fee change your mind?"

"My mind, I'm happy to say, is flexible."

"Will you talk with me about it?"

"Tomorrow morning. First thing."

"No. If not this afternoon, tonight. How about coming to your house?"

"That would be a very fat fee at overtime rates."

"Agreed."

I hung up and went back into the outer office. Millie was still at her desk, and my first appointment was just coming through the door. The appointment was a muscular moron charged with assault and battery.

He was currently free on bail, but that was, I feared, a reprieve strictly temporary. I told him to go in and wait a minute.

"Art gone?" I said to Millie.

"He just left."

"Since when have you and Art become chums?"

"I've gone out with him a couple of times, that's all. He's lonely since Ginger died."

"Good. Go to lunch."

"For your information, it's damn near time for dinner."

She was surly. Not, I confess, without reason. I had been, I thought uncomfortably, a harsh and demanding taskmaster.

"Take an extra half hour," I said.

"No, thanks," she said. "I've lost my appetite."

"Gas pains or something?"

"Nothing of the sort. How the hell do you expect me to eat when my mind's disturbed?"

"Anything I can do to help?"

"There was. Now there isn't. It's too late."

"Sorry. What could I have done?"

"You could have asked Jack Casey who it was he saw. Damn it, it's perfectly incredible that you didn't even *ask*."

So she eavesdrops on the extension. So I ought to fire her. "It serves you right for listening," I said. "I hope you go mad."

XI

AT ABOUT A quarter to eight, I went into the hall and turned on the light outside the front door. Back in the living room, Sid was watching me curiously.

"Why did you turn on the light?" she said.

"So Jack can find the house easier," I said.

"Jack? Jack who?"

"Jack Casey. he's going to stop by for a few minutes."

"What for?"

"He wants to consult me about something."

"Like what?"

"He wants me to figure out a way to get Cotton off his back."

"Damn it, Gid, you may as well

tell me directly what it's all about. It's probable, if it's something requiring ingenuity, that you'll need my help, anyhow."

"I doubt it. This is a simple problem that even I can handle. It's just that Cotton has dug up another witness, and this one has put the finger on Jack."

"How so?"

"Whoever it is saw Jack's car parked across the street from Cleo Cibber's house the night of Cleo's murder."

"Is it true? Was Jack actually there?"

"He was there, all right. He admits it. But he claims he never went in the house. He just sat in his car for awhile and then drove away."

"That doesn't seem very likely, if you ask me. Why should he do that?"

"I gather that he drove out there with the intention of batting Cleo around a little, but he changed his mind and decided he better hadn't."

"That may be true, or it may not, but anyhow I can understand why Cotton's making a big thing of it. It all sounds pretty incriminating, at least."

"All Jack has to do is tell Cotton who it was he saw going into Cleo's by the side door."

"He actually saw someone going in? Who?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

"Well, didn't you ask?"

"No, I didn't, and even if I had he wouldn't have told me."

"How do you know he wouldn't? Gid, it's simply impossible to understand you. We must get Jack to tell us who he saw, and that's all there is to it."

"You're real incurably nosey. You're as bad as Millie, if not worse. Did you know, by the way, that Millie's gone out a couple of times with Art Hanna?"

"Of course I knew it. Millie has a soft heart, and she feels sorry for Art. And you needn't think you can distract me by trying to change the subject."

"I'm more concerned about Millie's distraction than yours. It's hard enough to keep her working without Art hanging around the office. He was sitting on her desk when I came back from lunch today. There's a widower with ambitions if I ever saw one."

"He needn't get any exaggerated ideas about Millie, I can tell him that. She'll send him on his way when the time comes."

"Maybe today was the time. At any rate, he was there when I went into my office to call Jack, as requested, and when I came out again, he wasn't."

There was a sudden noise outside. Sid hesitated, head cocked, listening. "What was that?" she said.

"I don't know. It sounded like something bumped against the front door."

"Maybe it's Jack Casey."

"If it is, why doesn't he ring the bell? He doesn't have to break the door down."

"Why don't you go and see if it is or not?"

"Good idea. I'll do it."

I went and saw, and it was. It was Jack Casey lying outside our front door with a hole in his head. His hat had fallen off and was lying near his right hand, which was reaching out for a hold on something that wasn't there. He had fallen against the storm door and had slipped down it to the position he was now in. I had to push the door against his body, moving it back a little, to get outside. Something was oozing out of the hole in his head. He looked dead, and he was. I've never seen anyone deader.

Sid was breathing hard behind me. I could feel the breath on the back of my neck.

"I'd better hurry and call a doctor."

"There's no hurry. The police are who you'd better call."

I followed Sid inside. She was already telling someone at the police station to get some cops out in a hurry.

"Damn the luck!" she said, hanging up the phone.

"You can say that again," I said. "Jack Casey was no saint, but I never thought of him coming to an end as bad as this."

"I wasn't thinking of Jack's luck," Sid said. "I was thinking of ours. I mean his getting killed just before he had a chance to tell us who he saw going into Cleo's."

"You think there's a connection?"

"Certainly there's a connection."

It was, anyhow, clearly something to think about. I thought about it for the next fifteen minutes, which was as long as it took the police to come. After that it was impossible for some time to think coherently about anything whatever.

Cotton came first with a couple of cops, and the coroner came shortly after Cotton, and Hec Caldwell came after the coroner. They milled around outside the front door, and Sid and I sat in the living room as per Cotton's grim order, but after a while Sid said she thought she'd go make a pot of coffee in the kitchen, which she did. Left alone with my incoherent thoughts, I wondered if I could get away with a little Haydn, or maybe Mozart, but I was afraid that Cotton and Hec might feel it was frivolous, considering the gravity of the circumstances.

XII

AFTER QUITE A long time, I heard an ambulance at the curb. A couple of attendants came up the walk with a stretcher between them. They went back in the same

order and at the same interval, the stretcher between them and Jack Casey on the stretcher. I went back and sat down in my chair.

Sid came in from the kitchen, and Cotton and Hec came in from outside.

"Now," said Cotton, "let's hear it. You'd better make it good."

"Jack Casey was killed on our doorstep, that's what happened, and there is no way that I can see to make it good, for it's about as bad as it can be."

"I know he was killed, because he's dead. I'd like to know why it is, every time someone is strangled or shot or bashed over the head, you invariably wind up in the middle of it."

"As to that, there's no mystery. I'm forced to intrude by the incompetence of the police."

"There you go again. You're constantly slandering officials. By God, you'd better be careful what you say."

"We're off to a bad start, as usual," Hec said. "Cotton, you ought to be a little more tactful, and you, Sid, you ought to show a little more respect."

"It's difficult to show what is not felt," Sid said.

"You hear?" Cotton said. "By God, she's absolutely incorrigible."

"Sid," I said, "please quit slandering officials, and try to show a little more respect. In the meanwhile, if you will all only listen, I'll try to tell what happened."

"There." Hec said. "That's sensible."

"It had better be," Cotton said.

"Go ahead, Gid," Hec said. "Tell what happened."

I went ahead. I told how Jack had called, and how I'd called him back, and how he'd wanted to see me in the office, and how I couldn't see him there, and how, as a consequence, we'd arranged for him to come to the house at eight o'clock.

"What did he want to see you about?" Hec said.

I wasn't sure I ought to tell him, but I decided after a second or two that Jack had lost his privileges with his life. It didn't really matter about the part where he'd driven out to Cleo's the night of her murder, because Cotton and Hec already knew about it, but I told the other part too—the part about Jack's seeing someone slip in the side door before he finally drove away.

"Who was it he saw?" Hec said.

"I don't know," I said. "He didn't say. I have a notion he'd have told me tonight."

"Nuts," Cotton said. "If Jack Casey saw someone, why didn't he tell *me* who it was? He knew damn well I was tight on his tail."

The answer to his question entailed a personal opinion which I felt, for the sake of harmony, had better remained unsaid.

Cotton was looking at me as if he were trying to locate something

in or out of my story that he could classify as an omission, and evasion or a damn lie, and Hec was looking at Cotton as if he were reconsidering the possible validity of Sid's unfavorable and repeated opinion.

"Cotton," he said, "it looks like you were after the wrong man again."

"I don't see why," Cotton said.

"Well, if Jack was going to tell Gid who he saw, and was killed before he could tell, it looks like the one he saw was the one who killed him. That's reasonable."

"Did you actually come to that conclusion all by yourself?" Sid said. "It may be that you're a little brighter than I've always thought."

Cotton said, "How the hell did this person, whoever he was, know that Jack Casey was coming here tonight?"

"Maybe he was followed," I said.

"Sure," Sid said. "Someone followed him and parked down the street out of sight, and ran all the way up here with a rifle, and stood in the shadow of the hedge between us and the neighbors, and took careful aim, and shot him. It would have been no trick at all to do this in the minute or less that it took Jack to walk from his car to the house."

"That's the most sarcastic damn woman I've ever known," Cotton said.

"How," said Hec, "did you know the killer stood by the hedge?"

"That's easy. Because the hole in Jack's head indicated it. Where it was and all."

"How did you know he was shot with a rifle?"

"Dont't be absurd. Did you ever try to hit anything from that distance with a pistol?"

"That's pretty good thinking, I must say. We're convinced that the killer stood there and used a rifle, all right."

"What I'm *not* convinced of," Cotton said, "is that Jack Casey saw anyone at all go into Cleo Clober's. If you ask me, he just made it up to get me off his tail."

"Anyhow," said Hec, "if Jack did see someone, as he claimed, we'll never know now who it was."

"You may speak for yourself on that score," Sid said. "As for me, one way or another, I intend to find out."

"What you'll do," Cotton said, "is stay strictly out of what's none of your business."

"You may think it's none of my business, but I happen to think otherwise. Jack Casey has been killed right on my doorstep, and you are absolutely wrong if you imagine for a moment that I'm going to stand back idly and do nothing whatever about it."

XIII

THE NEXT MORNING, while I was brooding at the kitchen table over an angry egg, Sid appeared

unexpectedly and extinguished, by so doing, whatever sickly appetite I was nursing. She was scrubbed and brushed and groomed to the teeth. Recalling her threats of last night of independent action, I removed the angry yellow eye of the egg and looked at her with a pair of my own.

"Where," I said, "do you think you're going?"

"After awhile," she said, "I'm going downtown."

"Where downtown?"

"Why to see Dr. Schulenberg, of course. You know very well that I've had an appointment simply for ages."

Which was basically true. Being a fellow who can't even remember his own appointments, let alone those of others, I had forgotten all about it. Dr. Schulenberg, I may say, was an optometrist. Sid, I may add, was betraying signs of increasing myopia.

Glasses seemed to be indicated, and the good doctor was scheduled to pass, after appropriate tests, the final word.

"Do you want to ride down with me?"

"No, sugar. You're going too early. My appointment's not until ten."

"Where are you going afterward?"

"I have nothing in particular planned. I'll stop in the office before coming home."

"Just don't get yourself or me into any trouble, that's all. I've had about all I can stand."

"You needn't worry. It would be practically impossible to get into any sort of trouble in the office of Dr. Schulenberg."

This seemed so obvious as to hardly need saying, and I was so reassured that I even considered another try at my egg. Instead, I finished my coffee, and prepared to leave. I put on my hat and topcoat in the hall and kissed Sid by the door on my way out.

"Good-by, sugar," she said. "Have a good day."

A good day, under the circumstances, was hardly to be hoped for, but it could at least be, I thought, an improvement over the one I'd just had. I couldn't for the life of me see how it could be any worse. An optometrist's office, as Sid had pointed out, was surely not a place where one could expect trouble to develop, or even to begin. Which shows, as you will see, how much I knew about it.

At the office I spent half an hour briefing Millie on the grim events of last night. I didn't do this merely to satisfy her morbid curiosity, but because I preferred giving her a version somewhat more accurate than the ones she was bound to pick up here and there around town. This done, matters settled into a reasonable facsimile of normal routine, and that's the way they were when Sid dropped in, about eleven, from Dr. Schulen-

berg's. Hearing her in the outer office with Millie, I went out to join the party.

"How does it happen," Millie was saying, "that someone is always getting murdered in the vicinity of Gid? It's enough to scare a girl. Do you think he could be a kind of catalyst in some mysterious way?"

"I'm not prepared to say so definitely," Sid said, "but I'll admit that the thought has crossed my mind."

"Well," said Millie, "I'm naturally uneasy about my own security. After all, I'm in his vicinity more frequently than anyone else except you."

"If I'm willing to risk having him around," Sid said, "why shouldn't you be?"

"It seems to me," Millie said, "that you are somewhat more strongly committed than I. Nevertheless, I don't wish to be a deserter or anything. I'll go on risking it."

"Your loyalty is touching," I said. "I'm all choked up."

"If Della Street can do it," Millie said, "so can I."

"You hear that, Gid?" Sid said. "Millie's true blue."

I said, "How were things at Dr. Schulenberg's?"

"Very exciting."

"Oh, come on. What could be exciting about an optometrist's office?"

"Lots of things. That Dr. Schulenberg's absolutely the most fascinating man imaginable."

"You're kidding."

"No really. He's simply chock full of the most intriguing things."

"You could have fooled me. Dull is what I'd call him."

"That's because you are a notoriously bad judge of character, sugar. I'm much keener about such things, as you'll have to admit."

"What in the devil has Dr. Schulenberg said or done to seduce you so completely? I refuse to credit a fat old man approaching his dotage with any of the obvious tools."

"Nothing like that. He's simply a brilliant conversationlist, that's all."

"If you mean he's a garrulous old windbag, I'm with you. Are you, incidently, going into goggles?"

"Not exactly. Dr. Schulenberg has convinced me that contact lenses would be better."

"Also more profitable to Dr. Schulenberg. I can appreciate his position."

"The trouble with contact lenses," said Millie, "is that someone's always losing one or the other of them."

"What you have to do," said Sid, "is insure them." She slipped off the edge of Millie's desk, on which she had been perched with a liberal exposure of nice legs, including knees. "Well, I have several things to do before going home, and so I'll run along."

"What do you have to do?" Millie said.

"Oh, this and that," Sid said. "Nothing much."

"Don't you want to go to lunch?" I said.

"No, thanks. I don't believe I'll take time for it. See you later, Millie. Good-by, sugar."

And so, with a flip of the hand for Millie and a passing kiss for me, she went off to do this and that, or nothing much. Millie watched her go with a speculative expression.

"I have a notion," she said, "that Sid is up to something."

"What makes you think so?"

"Her eyes were shining. She was excited."

"She explained that. Dr. Schulenberg conversationally seduced her."

"Are you convinced of that? For your sake, let's hope you're right."

It was, of course, a vain hope. Where Sid went was to police headquarters, and what she did was corner Cotton McBride in his cubbyhole. Inasmuch as I wasn't there myself, I'm forced to rely on Sid's report for what was said and done, and this, roughly, is what was.

"What have you done about the murder of poor Jack Casey?" Sid said.

"What the hell do you expect?" Cotton said. "It only happened last night."

"Well, what have you done about the murder of Cleo Cibber? That didn't happen last night, and you failed to do anything yet, although you've had more than enough time."

"Like hell! I've done plenty, and you know it."

"You're right, and I apologize. You've done plenty, and every single thing you've done has been wrong."

"By God, you are an arrogant and offensive woman if one ever lived."

"That may be. Nevertheless, the fact remains that I know what is right to do, and I am willing to let you help me do it if you wish. If not, I'll simply have to do it myself and take all the credit."

Maybe it was the frightening and repeated threats of independent action. Maybe it was just weary realization that what can't be beat had better be joined. Anyhow, whichever it was, Cotton listened to what Sid had to say, and afterwards did what Sid assigned.

His assignments took him first to the Citizen's National Bank and then on a tour of local drug stores.

XIV

SID TURNED to me, said, "Gid, it's nearly eight o'clock."

"So it is," I said.

"It's also Saturday night."

"I believe you're right. Today was Saturday, and tonight's Saturday night."

"The second Saturday of the month."

"Right again. Time flies, and Saturdays with it."

"Well, why have you collapsed in that chair as if you intended to be there forever? If you don't hurry, you'll be late."

"Late where?"

"Please don't be so exasperating, Gid. You know very well that the second Saturday of the month is the night for your poker game."

"Oh, that. It's been called off."

"What!"

"Called off. Cancelled. We're not playing tonight."

"Damn it, Gid, you can't be serious."

I looked at her in some surprise, and in my murky mind a dark suspicion of something up seethed and simmered and began to bubble and boil. Her reaction, I mean, was not only excessive; it was also contrary in nature to all expectations. The Saturday night poker game had been a bone of contention in the Jones household, to put it mildly, and I had secured my liberty on the second Saturday night only after prolonged arbitration and unreasonable concessions.

I had every right, therefore, to expect my announcement to be received with satisfaction, if not outright jubilation. But not so. Instead of satisfaction, I was getting consternation. Something snide was clearly up.

"Certainly I'm serious," I said. "What's so incredible about calling off a poker game once in a while?"

"Gid, you are without doubt the most irresponsible and undependable man in town. Why wasn't I informed? What do you mean by calling off your poker game without my knowledge?"

"Frankly, I thought you'd be pleased."

"Well, you simply can't just hang around the house all evening. This is your night out, as we agreed long ago, and it's only fair that you should go somewhere and do something."

"I don't want to go somewhere and do something."

"How about bowling? Wouldn't you like to call up a friend and go bowling?"

"No, I wouldn't. I'd like to stay home and read and listen to some music and maybe watch 'Gunsmoke' on the boob tube."

"If you are going to watch a show on television, I don't see why you don't do the thing right and go to a movie."

It was high time, I thought, for revelation. To tell the dreadful truth, I had a queasy feeling that it was far *past* time. I stood up with a brave show of determination.

"What," I said, "is this all about?"

"What's what about?"

"Why are you trying to kick me out of my own house?"

There is a limit even to Sid's tal-

ent for evasion. She was cornered, and she knew it. As I watched her, she began to scratch the end of her nose with an index finger, and I could see that she was coming quickly to the conclusion that confession might be good for the soul, if not for domestic harmony.

"I suppose I might as well tell you," she said. "Your presence will complicate matters and entail some awkward explanations afterward, but I'm convinced now, thanks to your irresponsibility, that it can't be helped."

"Tell me," I said. "I'm all ears."

As bad luck would have it, she was saved by the bell. The *back* doorbell. Now, back doorbells are made to ring, of course, just like front doorbells. There is nothing unusual in this. They do not, however, ordinarily ring at night. Almost invariably, callers at night come to the front door. The ringing of the back doorbell, therefore, was unexpected and slightly alarming. To me. Not to Sid. Sid was neither surprised nor alarmed.

"It's too late now," she said. "You will simply have to figure things out as they happen."

Before I could reply, she turned and went out through the dark kitchen to the back door. She returned almost immediately with Millie Morgan.

"What's Gid doing here?" Millie said. "I thought he was to be sent away or something."

"Complications have developed," Sid said. "There's no time now to explain things properly."

"Proper or improper," I said, "I want to know what the hell's coming off here."

"As to what's coming off," Millie said, "that's Sid's secret to tell if she pleases. As to the propriety or impropriety, there is, as I understand it, a little bit of both."

And there again, just at the crux, the back doorbell.

"This time," I said, *"I'll* answer it."

"Don't turn on the light," Sid said.

Even in the dark, it was easy enough to recognize Cotton McBride. I grabbed him by the arm when he came through the door.

"If you don't tell me what this is all about," I said, "I'll break it."

"Let go, Gid." His voice was harassed and angry. "If you don't know what your own wife is doing, how the hell do you expect me to know?"

There was some justification for this, and I had to admit it. Reluctantly, I released his arm, unbroken, and we went into the living room.

"There you are, Cotton," Sid said. "Do you have your gun?"

"Certainly," said Cotton. "It's expected of policemen to carry guns."

"It isn't expected of them to use them," I said. "Not in my house."

"We can hope that it won't be required," Sid said.

"Just what I was hoping," Millie said. "I'm not at all sure that Cotton could hit who he aimed at."

"At whom," I said, "is he expected to aim?"

"If required," Sid said, "at the murderer."

"Cut it out, Sid," I said. "Do you seriously believe that Millie is the murderer?"

"Don't be ridiculous. The murderer is yet to arrive, and he will be here, if everything goes as planned, very shortly."

"If I'm not being too curious, *who* will?"

"You'll know in good time. Wait and see. In the meanwhile, you must all hide in the den and keep strictly quiet."

"What are *you* going to do?"

"I'll wait here in the living room. That's part of the plan."

"Plan or not, I don't like it."

"Damn it, Gid, that's why you were not supposed to be here. I was certain that you would do nothing but drag your heels and make things difficult. Do as you're told, please, and turn off the ceiling light before you leave. A romantic atmosphere is essential."

"Why is a romantic atmosphere essential to catching a lousy murderer?"

"That's part of the plan, too."

"Whatever the plan is, I like it less than ever."

"I simply will not argue with you, Gid. Turn off the light and get into the den at once."

XV

AND SO I did. Don't ask me why, because I don't know. Except that that's the way things go in the Jones family. I got into the den with Millie and Cotton, and we waited in strict silence and utter darkness. The den, off one end of the living room, is really an overstuffed closet, and it was pretty cluttered up with the three of us. Millie smelled like scented soap and Cotton smelled like sweat.

Preferring soap to sweat, I kept my nose pointed toward Millie, and after a while it began to tickle. I rubbed my nose and wished I could smoke and wondered why it had been essential to turn off the bright light in the living room.

Then the doorbell rang. Now, at the front door. There was a brief lapse of time, during which it could be assumed that Sid was answering, and then I heard a voice in the living room that was familiar, and I wanted to laugh. But I didn't, and I'm glad. For it was, as Sid had promised, the voice of the murderer.

"Are you sure Gid's gone?" the voice said.

"If he wasn't gone," Sid said, "would you be here?"

"Now that you ask," the voice said, "I wouldn't."

"Don't worry," Sid said. "I know what I'm doing. I'm not exactly inexperienced in these little affairs, you know."

There was a laugh, a smug cackle that stirred my short hair, and the sound of a body dropping heavily into a chair in a posture that was, I was certain, an indolent sprawl.

"You could have fooled me. I always thought old Gid had you sewed up tight."

"You never can tell what's what by appearances."

"By God, that's right. I can swear to that. People aren't always what they seem."

"Like you, for instance. I'll bet you'd never guess what attracted me to you."

"To tell the truth, I've been wondering. You could have knocked me over with a feather when you started making advances."

"Well, there's nothing mysterious about it. It's because you're ruthless. I'm fascinated by ruthless men."

"What makes you think I'm ruthless? No one else does."

"I'm not quite so easily deceived as everyone else. Consider the present situation, if you will. When you want a woman, you simply go after her and get her if you can. On the other hand, if you want to rid yourself of one, you do it just as directly."

There was another silence, long and unpunctuated. In the silence, a dreadful sense of sudden apprehension. Then the voice came back.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, you mustn't start right off trying to lie to me. We must be candid if we are to be good friends. I mean the way you got rid of Cleo Cibber, that's what I mean."

"You're crazy."

"Am I? I don't think so. I knew it the moment Dr. Schulenberg told me about the contact lens."

"What contact lens?"

"The one you lost in Cleo's apartment the night you killed her. Mrs. Zimmer heard the vacuum running, and when Dr. Schulenberg told me you'd been in to get the lens for your right eye replaced, I guessed immediately, of course, that it had been you running the sweeper because you'd lost the lens and simply *had* to find it before someone else did. Only, when you did find it, it had been stepped on and scarred or broken or something. You had to get another one."

"You said you guessed, sweetheart, and that's exactly what you did. But you guessed wrong."

"I would have, I admit, if it hadn't been for the accident later. When you were driving home. You would never have been hit in that intersection if the vision in your right eye hadn't been impaired. I thought it was odd that you were so anxious to settle out of court when you could simply have let the insurance company handle everything. You were afraid of an investigation, of course. It was much

safer to keep the matter quiet. When you signed the agreement, incidentally, you put on a pair of glasses. It wasn't until later that I realized I hadn't seen you wear glasses for a long time."

Silence again. Now in the silence, besides apprehension, a sense of deadly danger sprung from fear.

"You *are* clever," said Art Hanna.

"I told you so," said Sid.

"*Too* clever."

"No more so than you. And I'm not, moreover, one half so ruthless. Although I might, with sufficient provocation, be driven to kill one person, I don't believe I'd be able to kill three in a row. It's truly remarkable how you accomplished it."

"Three? Did you say three?"

"Yes. Does it surprise you that I know about Ginger? I don't blame you if it does, because I suspect I'm the only one you didn't deceive completely, and even I was deceived until recently. Now that a motive is apparent, however, I see things much more clearly."

"What motive?"

"Why, Cleo, of course. Cleo was greedy, as everyone knows. She kept demanding money and things. In the beginning you were compelled to borrow heavily at the bank, as I have taken the trouble to learn, and pretty soon you were in a deeper hole than you could crawl out of. Unless, that is, you could get hold of a great deal of money all at once. That, I believe, is why you killed Ginger. Not to be free for Cleo, who wasn't free herself, but to collect the money from Ginger's insurance policy. It was quite a large one, I understand."

"Ginger's dead and buried. Nothing can be proved now."

"It's probable that nothing could have been proved then, either. It was clever of you to use chloral hydrate. After I found the drug store where you bought it, I was interested to learn that it disappears very quickly from the body and can hardly be detected by autopsy or analysis or anything like that."

"You've been very busy, haven't you?"

"I just couldn't help myself. I've always been intrigued by puzzles and things. I must say, however, that I exaggerated when I said I was the only one you didn't deceive completely about Ginger's death. Cleo guessed the truth long before I, and that's the reason you had to kill her in the end. But she knew what your motive was, of course, and so the comparison really isn't fair to me."

"Do you actually believe all this?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't say it. You must confess that it's supported by circumstances. Take Jack Casey, for example. You were hanging around Millie's desk when Jack was on the phone with Gid,

and you must have heard most of what was said when Millie listened in, as usual. Isn't that so? Then, when Jack came here that night, as he said he would on the phone, he was shot in the head with a rifle. I'll bet the rifle is in your house this instant. We will know, at any rate, *after the police have finished looking for it while you are sitting here.*"

That was the bomb. That was when everything exploded.

Art Hanna squalled like a scalded cat and sprang out of his chair for Sid, who turned and ran toward the door to the den, out of which Cotton and I were simultaneously trying to get, while Millie, incited by the general uproar, stood behind us and yelled bloody murder. Anyhow, in the welter of trunks and extremities, I managed to grab Art and hang on, and Cotton managed to get out his gun, and it was then, thanks to Sid, all over.

Later, in uneasy peace and passing privacy, I dropped a shoe and looked at Sid, who was dropping her skirt.

"There's only one thing more I'd like to know," I said.

"What's that, sugar?" Sid said.

"I'd like to know how advanced advances have to get in order to lure someone to someone else's house in the hope of violating holy vows and setting asunder, thereby, what God has joined."

Picking up the dropped skirt, Sid hung it on a hanger and the hanger in the closet.

"Nothing is to be gained from recriminations on your part or regrets on mine," she said. "After all, certain sacrifices are required in the line of duty."

True enough. Even as there are certain compensations when duty is done.

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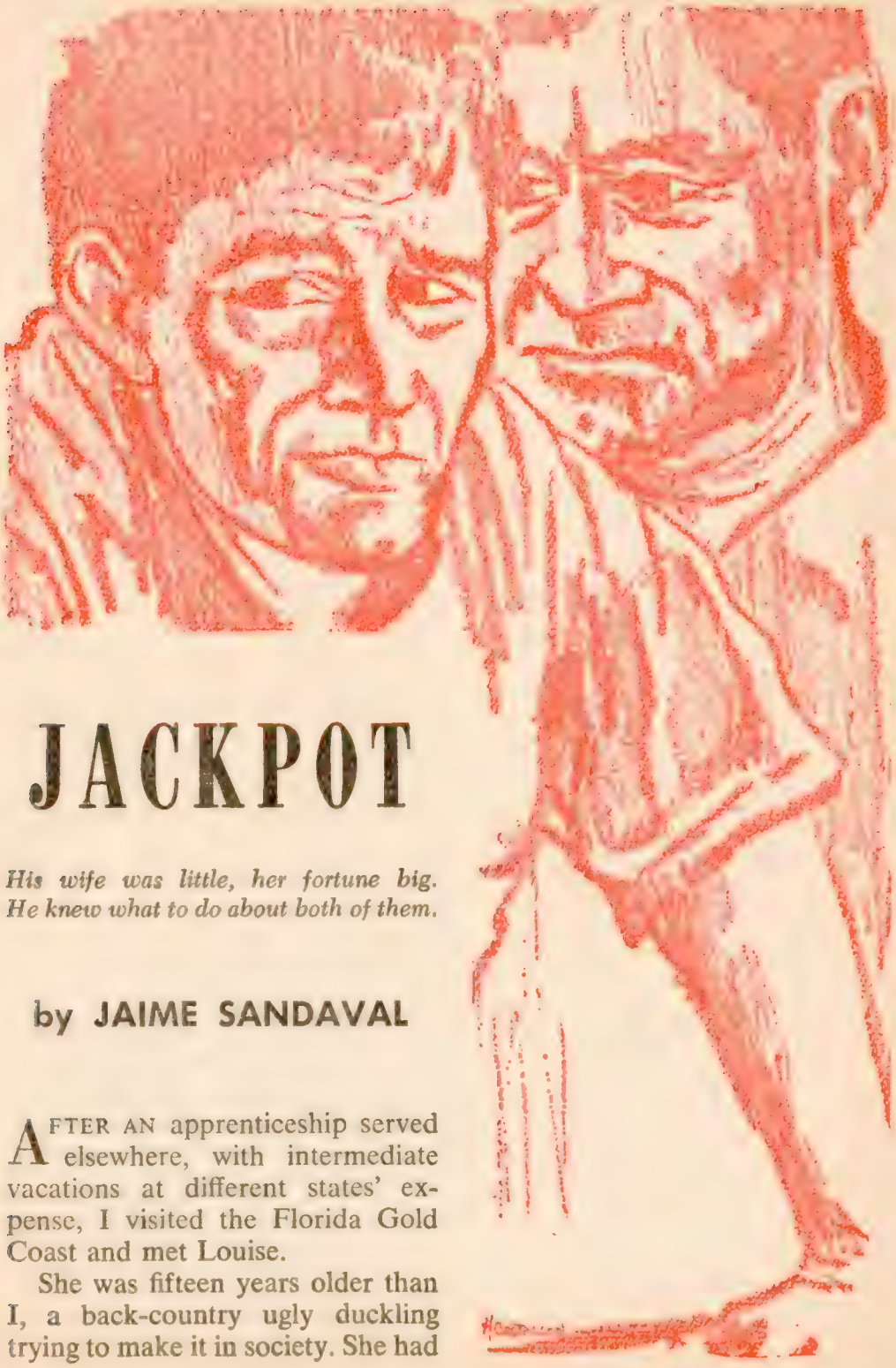

JACKPOT

His wife was little, her fortune big. He knew what to do about both of them.

by JAIME SANDAVAL

AFTER AN apprenticeship served elsewhere, with intermediate vacations at different states' expense, I visited the Florida Gold Coast and met Louise.

She was fifteen years older than I, a back-country ugly duckling trying to make it in society. She had

the usual asset—money. When I verified that it was in her own name, I married her, whereupon she suddenly surprised me.

"I *hate* this part of Florida," she said one morning, looking out from our balcony in our honeymoon hotel over the lush green golfing acreage over which I had been getting whatever daily exercise that didn't involve Louise. "We'll go back up to Saimes County near my brothers' homes and I'll build us a house that will make this ho-tel look like yonder caddie shack. Won't that be wonderful, sugar?"

It wasn't what I had in mind, but I wasn't about to quarrel with the purse strings so early in the game.

"Yes, dear," I said.

So we trekked a hundred forty miles inland to a flatland farming community more dreary than I could possibly have foreseen. While the house was being built, we lived in the local country club which, while not the Taj Mahal, was passable in its living conditions, although sadly lacking in the caliber of its membership.

"I want you—all to meet my husband," Louise would say proudly night after night on the wide veranda where she held court. A more unappetizing assortment of women I have seldom seen, and they all had husbands to match. I must have ground my teeth down a quarter inch during the period, listening to illiterate monologues on the trials of tomato raising.

When the house was completed, though, and we had moved in in what pomp and circumstance Louise's friends could arrange, I found the situation worsened, because then I had an unadulterated diet of Louise.

It was not my idea of living, nor did I plan to live in that style very long. My plans couldn't wait indefinitely, either, because Louise's secondary reason in marrying me had been for my name. I had to be rid of her before she learned what I'd done to it. My thinking along these lines was notably accelerated by the attitude of her three brothers, all suspicious types, all two hundred percent country boys, still uncomfortable in shoes. Their hostility toward me was so open and so uncompromising that an expedited course of action seemed essential.

We still went regularly to the Saturday night dances at the country club, and it was on this factor that I built my program.

"Less us g'home 'n go ta bed," Louise said to me late one evening, slurring her syllables in a manner to indicate that my evening long campaign to see to it that she had too much to drink had borne fruit. Her voice was clearly audible half a dozen tables away, and there was a subdued chorus of titters.

"Yes, dear," I said.

I got her out to her car and loaded her into the passenger's side of the front seat. I closed the car

windows and turned on the air conditioning. As we rolled out onto the highway, Louise drowsed beside me in a half stupor. At each turn in the road, her car lights reached out and reflected from the sleek, black waters of the canal that ran alongside the highway, for a five mile stretch never less than twelve feet deep. In the rear view mirror I could see the lights of another car some distance behind us.

Rounding a curve, I drove off the road into the canal. The impact was greater than I expected. Braced though I was, the wheel still dug into me. "What—" Louise mouthed blurrily in the instant before she was flung against the dash and then to the floor, where she scrambled about dazedly. We sank steadily with only a slight forward inclination as the headlights bored ahead through the murky water.

Inside the car, the water level rose more slowly than I had anticipated. When it covered my ankles, Louise jerked up to her knees on the floor. "Agggrrrrhhh!" she screamed like the lost soul she was, a thin, high-pitched wailing sound. She went for the door handle on her side of the car, and I watched her battle the water pressure that kept the door tightly closed.

"Oh, God!" she moaned when the water level reached our waists. Whimpering, she tried to climb over me to reach the door on my side. I don't think she was conscious of me as anything except an obstacle in her way. She was pure animal, her face a twisted snarl in the refraction of light caused by the headlights in the water outside.

I seized her by the shoulder and pinned her down to the seat, below the steadily rising water level. As it rose higher, I rose with it, still holding her under. The whole proceeding suddenly struck me as hysterically funny; before I could prevent it, I found myself laughing out loud. I took a grip on myself. This was no time for undisciplined reaction.

Louise's struggles had gradually become weaker. By the time I was breathing from the pocket of air just under the roof, they had stopped completely. I took a long breath, ducked my head under, and tried my door handle. The water inside the car had equalized the outside pressure. The door opened easily. I slid out, frog-kicked twice, and surfaced in a ring of headlights beaming out from the shore.

A babble of voices rose as the crowd standing on the canal bank sighted me.

"There he is!" someone shouted.

"Hurry! Hurry!" a woman shrieked.

"Keep swimming!" a man bellowed. "We'll be there in a minute!"

Someone was already in the water, swimming toward me. I oriented myself, then surface-dived back down to the submerged automobile, guided by the glare of the headlights in the water below me. I

opened the door on Louise's side, pulled out her limp figure, and rose again to the surface with it.

"Attaboy!" my would-be rescuer panted, still thrashing sturdily toward me. "With—you in a—second!"

I swam for the bank, angling away from him, not especially difficult since he wasn't a good swimmer. I still kept Louise's head under water, although I was sure it was no longer necessary. At the bank, men held onto scrub brush and reached eagerly down the steep incline to grasp and raise my burden from the waters of the canal. For an instant all eyes were upon Louise; I relaxed every muscle and let myself go completely limp.

"Watch out!" someone yelled. "He's going under!"

I sank beneath the surface, swallowing mouthfuls of the brackish water. Dull splashes resounded in the water around me as men dived in after me. Many hands seized me and hauled me back up to the surface. In a titantic struggle, my dead weight was half lifted, half rolled up onto the bank and dumped down beside Louise. A man in a shortsleeved sportshirt was giving her frantic mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

"Get busy on him!" an authoritative voice ordered. Someone thumped himself down athwart me in the old-fashioned method. I choked and sputtered artistically while ridding myself of the accumulated canal water.

"Here's the ambulance!" someone said tensely as a siren's scream split the black night. Louise and I were rolled onto stretchers and loaded aboard. During the wild ride through the blackness the redheaded intern twice injdected a hypodermic syringe into Louise's arm. Before we completed the trip, though, he was writing out a yellow ticket which he attached by its cord to Louise's big toe.

"Mortuary with this one," the intern said curtly to the driver when he parked in the hospital courtyard and came around to the rear of the ambulance. The intern laid a hand on Louise's stretcher.

I stayed in the hospital overnight, commiserated with upon all sides over my loss despite my sterling efforts to save Louise. "You'd better stay another day, son, until we're sure we have your lungs cleared," the doctor said to me in the morning.

"That won't be necessary, thank you," I refused politely.

I returned to the house and waited. I was busy with the funeral preparations, of course.

"Your neighbors sho'ly do sympathize with you in your b'reavement," Louise's minister informed me gravely. "It's a tragic thing."

On the second day the autopsy report said death by drowning. A hastily convened coroner's jury ruled accidental death. I was sur-

prised at the number of people who came to the funeral. The long line of cars wound through the country roads to the cemetery dominated by live oaks draped in Spanish moss. The graveside ceremony was painfully protracted, but I endured it. Returning to the house, I had only one thought: I was in the clear and had only to await the probate of Louise's estate.

The awakening was rude. Four days after the funeral, Big Henry, the oldest of Louise's brothers, came to see me. Previously all the brothers had avoided me, which I had thought peculiar.

"You killed her, you no-good Yankee pretty boy," Big Henry growled at me. He was a lump of a man, unshaven, with a shock of graying hair and unswerving bloodshot eyes. The odor of cheap whiskey was strong about him. "You killed her," he repeated with a malevolent glare. "You done it a-purpose. You may've fooled the sheriff and the jury, but you ain't a-foolin' us. Around here we kill our own snakes, mister man, an' you just come up head snake.

"Five years ago my brothers an' I done told Jud Moody down the road we gonna kill him when we got him to rights. Well, sir, you jus' passed him on the list. We gonna git you. We gonna git you good. You ain't gonna live to enjoy our sister's money." He spat heavily on my right shoe and stalked away.

I took a renewed grip on my

nerves. It was a complication, but it shouldn't have been a problem. I'd heard whispered stories of the brothers' resourcefulness in repaying real or fancied injuries, but if I watched myself, what could they do? It just meant being careful for a year, until the court settled the estage in my favor, and I should certainly be able to watch myself —and the brothers—for a year.

I didn't last three months. In my own behalf, I can plead only that I had met up with a distraction in the ample form of the Widow Barnes, a butterball of a female with a sensuous mouth and a fixed income from insurance stock. It seemed like such an easy touch I moved incautiously into the front lines. I was encouraged in this by the fact that the widow was much more accessible than the average run of her back-country neighbors.

Progress was encouraging, until I was spending considerable after-dark time in her bedroom. The widow had a mouth like a shark's but a certain natural liveliness that lent a bit of unexpected spice to the affair.

Then, one moonless night I went out her back bedroom window and

crossed a sloping roof and climbed down a rear porch column to the ground. Humming to myself, I made my way along the rutted lane heavy with the scent of bougainvillea in the direction of my parked car. Two thirds of the way, a monstrous shadow rose up from thick bushes and felled me with a single chopping blow of a club. As I went down I recognized Big Henry.

I didn't lose consciousness. The younger brothers materialized, and all three grabbed a limb and dragged me roughly down the lane to my car. A bottle was produced, and a fifth of raw whiskey was poured over me and into me, the bottle being repeatedly jammed into my mouth forcibly enough to chip a tooth. I choked and gagged over the reeking 'shine.

"Tell the devil to make room for Jud Moody, if you get there 'fore Moody does," Big Henry snarled at me. " 'Cause the devil's is the next face you're gonna see, mister." I saw him draw back his arm and start his big, gnarled fist down toward my face, and then I didn't see anything.

When I opened my eyes, I thought Big Henry had made good on his threat. I was surrounded by the white, staring faces bending over me, illuminated by the glare of car lights and red railroad flares. A loud metallic noise was issuing from the region of my hurting abdomen. I was behind the wheel of a car, and the sharply bent steering column that was pinning me to the front seat was being sawed free.

I couldn't see out of one eye at all, but with the other in better focus I was able to see that it was a state trooper and a man in a garage coverall who eventually lifted me out from under the wheel.

There was a grating of bone in my rib-section, and my left arm felt numb. The car was on a road I didn't recognize. People stood around staring in the lights. As the men supported me while a wheeled stretcher was run under me, I could see another car slewed across the road in front of us, its front crushed in and its hood in the air. When they wheeled my stretcher into an ambulance, I could see that my car was on the wrong side of the road.

The next day the sheriff came out to the hospital and placed me under arrest. The charges were drunken driving and manslaughter. The man in the other car was dead, and the man in the other car had been Jud Moody.

I lay there in the hospital bed, mummified in splints and bandages, cursing my own stupidity in not having forestalled the three cushion billiard shot the brothers had brought off, successful in all aspects except that I was still alive.

I pleaded with the hospital's resident physician to send for the sheriff so that I could make a case for myself. The physician said curtly that the sheriff was too busy to come and that I would have my

day in court. That was what I was afraid of; with my record, any day in court for me could have only one ending. "At least call Bob Wyatt for me," I asked him. Bob Wyatt had been Louise's lawyer.

The resident hesitated.

"Wyatt won't come," he said at last.

"Am I entitled to a lawyer or aren't I?" I demanded. "You call Wyatt."

But he was right; Wyatt refused to come, and he wasn't the last to refuse. I wondered if Big Henry was doing some old fashioned country-style intimidating, now that his plan to kill me had backfired. None of the estate had been liquidated, and I was short of ready cash.

Through one of the orderlies, I finally got a lawyer to come out and listen to my story. He looked, sounded, and acted like a shyster, but he still wouldn't take my case. All during my recital of the sequence of events, properly expurgated, he sat beside my bed regarding me from behind his gold rimmed glasses as if I were some strange-colored animal.

"Plead guilty," he told me when I finished, rising and obviously in a hurry to be gone. "You might get probation."

I knew I couldn't get probation, but eventually I pleaded guilty. I'd had time for some second thoughts. There was really no reason I couldn't do a year cheerfully, until I got back on my feet. It would have the added virtue of keeping me out of the brothers' way while the estate was being probated and its assets transferred to my name. The judge frowned when he read the record the probation officer handed up to him, and postponed sentencing for two weeks.

I was able to walk, with the aid of two canes, when it came time to go back to the courtroom for the sentencing. Having, as I thought, prepared myself for the situation, I was in a comparatively blithe frame of mind. So I listened unbelievingly as the judge read me a blisteringly vitriolic lecture on drinking and death on the highways, and sentenced me to five to seven years on the manslaughter count. I couldn't decide if it was his honest conviction or if the brothers had reached him, but what difference did it make?

When my appeal was turned down, I began serving my sentence. There was a certain grim irony in the fact that after a lifetime of scrambling for dollars in the back alleys of the country I was now about to come into a considerable amount of same, but I found it difficult to appreciate the irony.

The first year did pass quickly for me, though, lightened by letters and visits from lawyers and probate court officers with papers for me to sign. Louise's estate was liquidated as per my instructions, and

I was surprised at the amount of it. She had assets she'd never revealed to me, and I was careful to have it all transferred out of the state, where the brothers couldn't possibly get their hands on it.

But long before the first year was up, even, I knew that my troubles were just beginning. About twice a month a newcomer would sidle up to me in the yard or in the chow line and relay from the side of his mouth Big Henry's monotonously consistent message to me: "The day you walk out them front gates, man, is the day we gonna kill you."

I'll figure an angle, I told myself confidently when I first heard it. I'll beat this thing. No back country yokels are going to hang this rap on me. But I haven't been able to figure an angle, and it's grinding me down.

It's grinding me down because, for one thing, I don't know how much time I have. I wasn't long in realizing that I had other things to worry about than the day I walked out the front gate. Suppose Big Henry gets tired of waiting? Half the trash shipped in here would slip a knife in my back for the fun of it, let alone being paid to do it.

I stand now with my back to a solid object, always. I've lost fifteen pounds, and I'm not sleeping nights. The least little noise in any corner of the cell block brings me right up standing, and then I can't get back to sleep again. I've told the prison doctor that I'm troubled with vertigo and shortness of breath, but he says there's nothing the matter with me.

All my life I've prided myself on making the next move count, and now I don't know what to do. Even if I make it to the end of my sentence, I won't know what to do. Big Henry is perfectly capable of stretching out on his belly a thousand yards from the prison gate with a telescopic sight mounted on a .30-.30, and nailing me the second the steel doors clang shut behind me. I've got more money than I ever thought there was in the world, and I don't know what to do.

But the end of the sentence is a long way off, and I've got more immediate problems. I keep watching Big Henry's messengers, of course. I've seen them observing me from the corners of their eyes when they think I can't see them, whispering together, nodding in my direction. There are days that I'm positive they're planning to get me, while on others I keep telling myself to stop thinking like that, or I'll really be in trouble.

But if they actually think they're going to get me, I'll see them in hell first. I've got a rat-tail file I stole from the carpenter shop. The first one who makes a move—

Lately, though, I've begun to realize how Louise must have felt under the slowly rising water.

THE SHARD

by

MARTHA HOKE

•

She was parlaying a two-bit fake into a fortune—and something must be done.

MR. PAFLEY looked around the room and pounded discreetly on the desk with his fist.

"Fellow jewelers," he began and his eyes found Mr. Sharp in the

front row. Mr. Pafley stuck to his guns. "Fellow jewelers. Our prestige is being threatened. I called you here this Sunday afternoon to hear several stories which will prove to be of interest to you."

He swept his hand across his receding hairline. "Mr. Sharp, the gentleman who will first address you, is the manager of the Fourth Street One to a Dollar Store." Mr. Pafley raised his eyebrows. They defied even a cough. He moved to a chair beside the desk, sat down heavily.

Mr. Sharp adjusted the collar of his chalk-striped suit and moved uneasily behind the desk. Perspiration dotted his brow. He mopped at it vainly with a blue polka-dot handkerchief.

"Two weeks ago I was minding the jewelry counter while the clerk was out to lunch." Mr. Sharp threw Mr. Pafley a glance and received reassurance. His voice sank to a more normal tone. "A nicely dressed, middle-aged dame came up to the counter and began looking at the—the diamonds in the rack. I had to go wait on a man at the other end of the counter. That's when she took it!"

"Took what?" A man in the second row asked.

"Took the dollar and a half ring," Mr. Sharp explained. "But that's not all." His voice became indignant. "She left me a shard, a thirty cent ring in its place! Right in the same rack! Now, we don't have no rings in our case less than eighty-nine cents."

Sharp appealed with his hand. "The dollar and a half ring is the best we got." He sighed. "But you got to hear from Morrie Bline." He stopped on his way to his seat. "Morrie has the place across the street from me."

There was a stirring in the room. Mr. Pafley raised his hand. "Go ahead, Mr. Bline."

"You see," Morrie Bline addressed the crowd with assurance. "We got nothing but jewelry in our store. The diamonds?" He shrugged. "They run from five dollars to ten and they look pretty good." He turned to Mr. Pafley. "Better settings," he explained. "At a distance you can fool a lot of people."

Bline warmed to his subject. "The day after Sharp was robbed, a middle-aged lady came in and spent a lot of time looking at the diamonds. She had on a brown suit and a sort of feathered hat. She didn't buy nothing. But after she left I was putting the rings away when I found Mr. Sharp's ring. The way I figure it, she palmed the ten dollar ring and left me the dollar and a half one."

Mr. Bline leaned on the desk. "Sharp and me had lunch together at the hamburger stand the next day and I got to telling him about losing the ten dollar ring. He told me about the dollar and a half one."

Mr. Pafley rose. "That's all for now, Mr. Bline. We must get on with this." Mr. Bline reluctantly left the floor for his seat next to Mr. Sharp.

Mr. Pafley said, "I will have to talk for Mr. Connet, who does a good business in Zircons. He was unable to attend."

He tapped the desk with well manicured fingers. "The first part of last week, a middle-aged lady, this time dressed in black with a fur stole, palmed a hundred dollar Zircon in his shop and left Mr. Bline's ten dollar ring in its place. The rings seemed to be in order when she left and the clerks were busy. Mr. Bline recognizes the ring."

Now there was a buzz of conversation in the room.

Mr. Pafley drew himself up. "Now, gentlemen, there is quite a discrepancy between Zircons and diamonds. Mr. Tenner, of Tenner's has given me permission to speak for him to save time. This was a definite error of a new clerk and has been rectified. The same lady exchanged the hundred dollar Zircon for a thousand dollar diamond in his establishment. Then, to make a long story short, in Mr. Zork's Jewelry Store, she, in turn, exchanged the thousand dollar ring for one priced at seventy-five hundred."

Mr. Pafley looked around the room. "Mr. Minton, we should like to hear what you have to say."

Mr. Minton stalked to the front of the room, frowning. He surveyed his nails and then Mr. Pafley. "I don't see where this is getting us, Joe. But I do have some respect for your business acumen." He folded his arms and began.

"Early last Friday morning a woman walked into our store. Oddly enough, she was dressed in black and wore a fur stole. At her request a clerk took out a tray of diamond baubles for her inspection. She had asked to see the best things we had, but the clerk felt she was not satisfied with the selection, since she left without buying anything. He believed all the stones were accounted for. However, somewhat later, the clerk thought he noticed a somewhat duller stone among our rings and called me."

Mr. Minton touched his small mustache and went on. "The duller ring in question was a two carat seventy-five point ring worth seventy-five hundred dollars. I have the seventy-five hundred dollar ring in my pocket. She had removed a three carat sixty-nine point Marquise diamond worth nineteen thousand dollars!"

Now there was silence in the room. Mr. Minton stalked back to his seat. Mr. Pafley nodded. "Mr. Merryman. May we have your story?"

A corpulant man of sixty eased out of his chair.

Mr. Merryman glared around the room. "Each of you has something in return for the exchange. I have a ring which very well might be the nineteen thousand dollar ring of which Mr. Minton speaks. But the woman who left it removed a five carat thirty-point Marquise diamond worth thirty-eight thousand five hundred dollars."

He turned to Mr. Pafley. "Where does this end, Joe?"

Mr. Pafley said, "There is a distinct possibility that I know where it will end, Mr. Merryman. Will all of you be patient while I explain my concern and how I became involved with this affair?

"Mr. Tenner came to me because I am the head of The Retail Jeweler's Association. We are competitors, but among us we have pride. By coincidence I happened on to Mr. Zork's and Mr. Merryman's stories last Friday afternoon. It was not difficult to follow the lady. Yet none of these men wish to part with their substitute jewelry until they receive their own rings."

Mr. Pafley nodded and held out his hands for silence. "Gentlemen, I have a plan. As the lady insists on improving herself, let me assert modestly, there is only one more place to go. That will be my shop! Only at Pafley's can she find a ring which will exceed Mr. Merryman's in price. It may take a week but I think she will show."

Mr. Pafley steepled his fingers. "If the gentlemen involved will bring their rings to my store and consider themselves my employees for the next week, maybe something can be worked out. These gentlemen will identify the lady and I will take over from there. Mr. Sharp, will you bring me your ring, while the rest of you are considering the matter? Remember, this must involve no notoriety and no fuss with the law."

Mr. Merryman raised his voice. "After all, at the moment, I am the biggest loser. Shall we agree to give Mr. Pafley's plan a chance?"

On Monday nothing at all happened. But on Tuesday morning a middle-aged lady dressed in black, wearing a fur stole, opened the door and walked into the rarified atmosphere of Pafley's.

Mr. Pafley stepped behind the counter, glancing to the right and left at his temporary employees. From each he received a nod.

Mr. Pafley administered his most courteous bow. "What can I do for you?"

The lady smiled. "I should like to see some of your better diamond rings." She seated herself on the velvet chair directly in front of the counter.

Mr. Pafley's employees busied

themselves with two customers and various trays of jewels.

Mr. Pafley reached under the counter and reverently laid a velvet rack of diamonds before her. "Let me show you some less expensive diamonds in comparison," he said pleasantly, and turned his back to open a drawer. "It will be simpler for you to notice the difference," he explained over his shoulder.

The lady dawdled over the first case, examining one and then another ring. Then she sighed. "They are most attractive but I do want to give the matter some thought." She rose. "Thank you. I will return after luncheon."

Mr. Pafley came around the counter and a most unfortunate thing happened. He slipped, and his arm came down on the lady's hand, and one of his size nine alligator shoes became entangled with her legs. Quite awkwardly the lady found herself upon the floor, with her handbag half a dozen yards away, her stole and gloves half a dozen yards away in another direction.

"Well!" she offered indignantly as Mr. Pafley helped her to her feet. He said, "I am terribly sorry, Madame," and scurried to collect her belongings. Draping her stole about her shoulders, he handed her the bag and then the gloves. "Here are your things, Madame. I do hope you are not hurt? It was most awkward of me."

The lady stared at him, speechless, as he propelled her to the door. He watched as she went with some haste down the street past Pafley's windows. Then he shrugged, turned to the velvet rack and walked over to hand Mr. Merryman a ring. "I think you'll find this belongs to you, sir."

The two customers would never understand what happened next. "Return your rings to their original owners," Mr. Pafley instructed. And each Pafley employee handed another a ring.

Mr. Sharp asked the only question and received the only answer.

"Mr. Pafley! The dame had a ring in her hand as she left. Why didn't you stop her?"

"Now, Mr. Sharp, how could I?" Mr. Pafley smiled. "The ring she had in her hand was hers. You gave it to me the other day—what was it you called that thirty cent ring, a shard?"

Mr. Pafley hummed to himself as he gently replaced his fifty thousand dollar Marquise diamond in its velvet setting.

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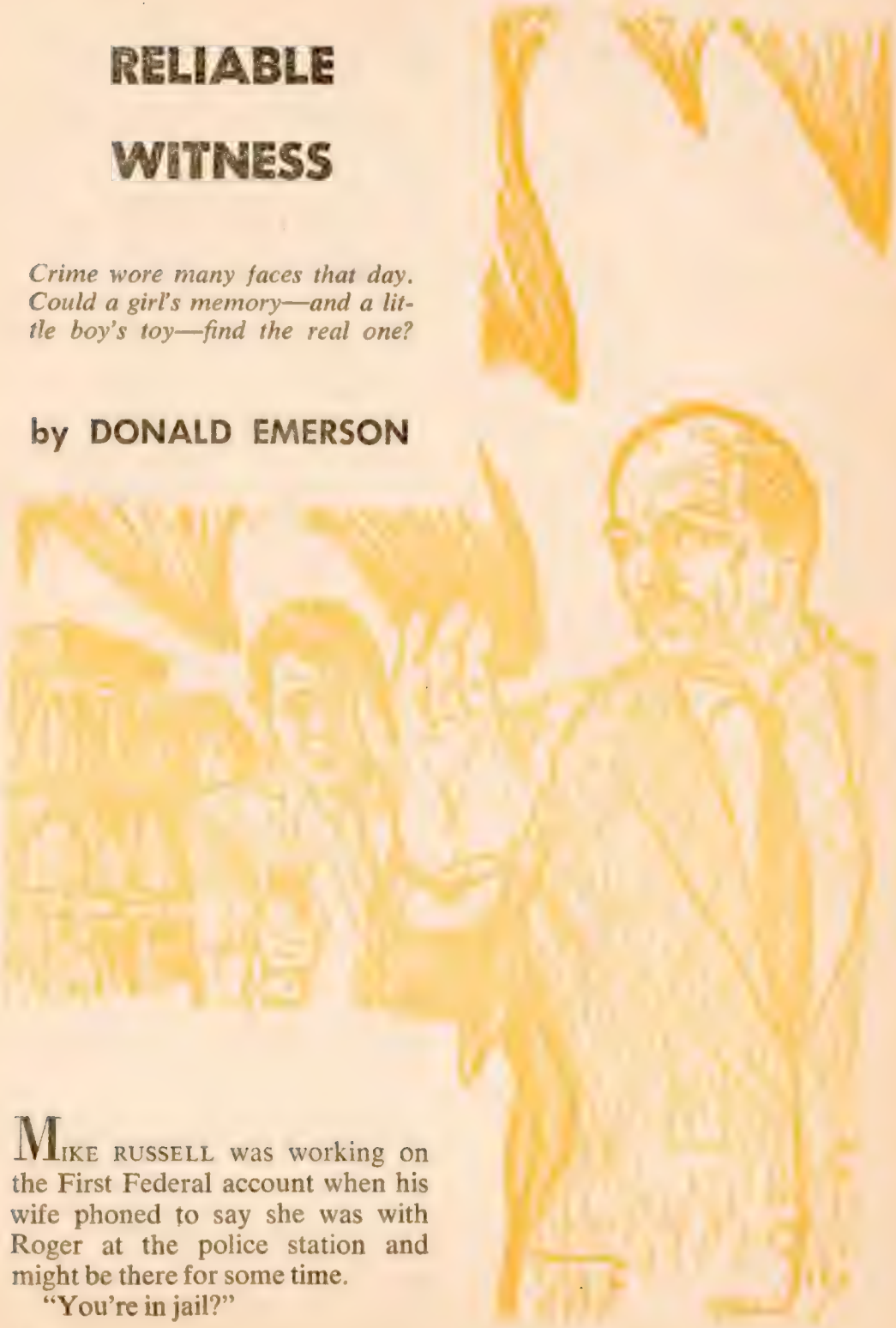
RELIABLE WITNESS

Crime wore many faces that day. Could a girl's memory—and a little boy's toy—find the real one?

by DONALD EMERSON



MIKE RUSSELL was working on the First Federal account when his wife phoned to say she was with Roger at the police station and might be there for some time.

"You're in jail?"

From the sudden calm of the office, Mike realized his voice must have gone up, though he couldn't catch anyone watching.

"No, dear. I witnessed a holdup."

"Do you need bail?"

"I don't think so. Nobody said anything. They've been very nice."

While she was speaking to somebody, Mike watched Miss Parsons roll a sheet of paper into her machine and go back to studying her notebook.

Miss Dussow opened a folder and shuffled papers.

"They want me to make an identification," Louise said.

"I'm coming down anyhow."

On his way out he said to Miss Parsons, "You can tell Mr. Wheelock I've gone home. If he asks."

Miss Parsons nodded and said, "Good night. Mr. Russell." She was a well trained secretary, but she had never mastered the twitch in her eyebrow.

"She's not in jail," Mike said. Miss Parsons reminded him of his teacher in third grade, the one who said it was always best to tell the truth. "She witnessed a holdup."

"Oh," Miss Parsons said. "Really."

Anybody might witness a holdup, Mike thought on his way to the Safety Building. But as a tax-paying, law-abiding citizen he wanted to get his wife away from there. He remembered Louise saying they'd been very nice, and he found himself muttering in Miss Parsons' tones, "Oh, really."

He found his son Roger on the fourth floor, sitting on a bench and swinging his feet while he ate an ice cream bar. Roger moved his camera and his baseball cap as his father sat down beside him.

"They're real nice, Dad. Sergant brought me this ice cream from the canteen."

"Where's your mother?"

Roger gestured toward the rooms beyond a railed area. "In there somewhere. She's all right, I guess."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. I was in the car."

"Where?"

"Outside the store."

Mike Russell wiped his forehead.

"Just tell me the whole thing, son," he said patiently. "Start at the beginning."

The beginning, for Roger, was being picked up after school to go shopping. Then they were going to pick up Dad and eat out because it was the night for Mom's sketch club. All of a sudden a squad car roared up while Roger was waiting in the car.

"After a while two cops came out with Mom," Roger said. "I took a picture."

"Lucky you had your camera."

"I got a picture of the team at school. That's how come I had it."

"I'll buy a print of your mother and the police," Mike said. "Then what?"

"We came over here. They were real nice."

Mike laid a gentle hand on his son as Roger stuffed the last of the ice cream bar into his mouth.

"What happened, Roger?"

"Well, we were at this art store. Mom went in to get supplies and somebody held up the old guy who runs it. He got away."

"And your mother saw him?"

Roger nodded. "She saw him with his mask off."

"How?"

"I don't know."

"Did he see her?"

"I dunno."

Louise filled in some of the details after Mike, in despair of getting the story out of his son, asked to see his wife. She was seated at a desk with a pile of police photos, her purse, a pack of cigarettes and a large package.

"I got my supplies," she told Mike, while an officer already familiar with the story lit a cigarette and studied the ceiling. "Then I stooped to look at paperbacks, on the bottom shelf. That's why the bandit didn't see me."

"How could you see him?"

"That old man has mirrors so he can watch the aisles. I just happened to look up and saw this man taking a handkerchief off his face."

She pushed the pile of identification photos toward the patient officer. "He's not any of these."

There were more. Louise began looking at them, then paused. "I'm sorry, Mike. Please wait with Roger. You'll throw me off."

Mike went back to Roger and discussed the advisability of another ice cream bar. He chatted with the friendly sergeant, who assured him the robbery was a $26.53 affair. He checked his watch against the city's time.

The officer who had been with Louise came out and spoke to the sergeant.

"She has a better idea," Mike

heard him say. "She's going to draw him."

Mike Russell caught a glance from the sergeant, but it was noncommittal. It seemed to indicate that the sergeant was married to a fine woman whom he tried to understand with patience, and any husband worth the name would do as much. It also said no man should judge another's weakness.

"I thought it was you, Dad," Roger said. "Mom said we'd meet you, and when this guy came out, I grabbed my camera. I thought maybe we were meeting at the store."

"I was at work."

"I know. I was looking in the viewer or I'd have seen the guy real plain. I told the cops which way he went." He paused. "Can I have another ice cream?"

"Not now."

Roger swung his feet for a while; then he pulled one foot up on the bench. He put his baseball cap on backwards, fiddled with his camera.

"Do you think there'll be a reward, Dad?"

"I doubt it. This is petty stuff."

Roger put the camera down, he took off his baseball cap. Then he got a drink, retied his shoestrings.

"I wish I wouldn't have wasted a film on that guy," he said.

"You took a picture?"

"Yeah. I thought it was you."

"Didn't you tell anybody?"

Roger shook his head. "If there's a reward, I'm going to get it. I got a real good shot of the guy."

Mike took the box camera and started to rewind the film.

"Dad, it still has four shots left," Roger protested.

"I'll buy you another. Keep still!"

The officer was back to consult with the friendly, patient sergeant.

"She's not doing so good," he said. "She keeps rubbing it out."

"She's perfecting it, Benson."

Roger gripped his father's arm. "It's my reward, Dad."

Right. But this is the only way you'll get it." After the film wound free inside the camera, he took a dollar from his wallet. "Get some more ice cream, Rog. We may be here a while."

This time the sergeant didn't feel he could leave his desk, what with phone calls coming in, but he detailed the other officer to accompany Roger to the canteen. "Stop for coffee while you're at it, Benson. Bring mine with cream, no sugar. Mr. Russell?"

"Black. No sugar."

Mike handed him the film from Roger's camera.

"Why didn't the kid say something?"

"He had notions of a reward."

When the sergeant came back, he gestured toward the room where Louise was working on her sketch. "We'll just let Mrs. Russell work away. Might not be anything on that film. Cigarette?"

Mike warmed to the sergeant's hospitality. They tapped ashes and the sergeant disposed of a phone call before he asked Mike, "Mrs. Russell draws a good deal? Paints?"

Mike nodded. "She's done some nice things."

The sergeant's reflective nod indicated his entire faith in this possibility. "Mrs. Carnachan crochets."

"That's nice," Mike allowed.

The sergeant regarded him with the inscrutable look of a man raising a small pair.

"She'd doily the doormat if I'd let her."

Small talk languished once the cigarettes were finished. After

Benson and Roger returned, Mike went to sit on the bench again.

Prints came up from the lab while Sergeant Carnachan was relishing his coffee, but he put it down and spread the damp photos on his blotter.

He took one look and said, "Limber Louie! Benson, you know what to do."

Then he picked up his coffee once more.

"Come around here, son," he said to Roger, and he clicked the gate open. "I'll send you these when they're dry."

Mike looked over his son's shoulder, his attention drawn to the shot of Louise leaving the art store in the hands of the law. Technically, no; but the picture showed her flanked by formidable officers, and she might have been a shoplifter taken red-handed.

"I think I've got it!"

Mike started at the sound of his wife's voice. Louise was carrying her sketch block, and she held it up while she was a few feet from them.

The drawing clearly represented a human head.

Sergeant Carnachan swivelled around, rose, and studied the sketch.

"I've seen the face," he said thoughtfully. "Benson!"

Benson stared. He looked at the sergeant, then at the sketch, then at the sergeant again. "Limber Louie?"

"Have him picked up."

Sergeant Carnachan extended his hand to Louise Russell. "You've been very helpful. I'll be in touch with you. If he confesses, you don't have to testify."

He turned back to his desk as he tore the sheet from the sketch block. "If you don't mind, Mrs. Russell, I'll keep this."

"Of course."

He caught the sergeant's eye, and he caught a gesture of the head that told him that if he wanted to square his son, he still had a few seconds. As Mike and Roger were going through the gate, Sergeant Carnachan said, "I'd like you to sign this, Mrs. Russell. I'll want to keep it."

Mike had a glimpse of Louise bending over the sergeant's desk as he lowered his head to Roger's. "Listen, son. Don't say anything about that photograph. I want your mother to think she helped."

Then Louise was with them, and Mike wondered what his third grade teacher would think of him.

"Weren't they nice!" Louise said when they were in the elevator. "This whole business has increased my respect for law enforcement in this town."

He thought he saw Roger wink, and it made him very uneasy. Here he was as good as deceiving his wife and definitely corrupting his son. It was pretty questionable morality, and he wondered whether his old teacher would have understood.

He thought not.

She had never been married.

(Continued from other side)

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